MAHAR, BUDDHIST AND DALIT

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Religious Conversion and Social-Political Emancipation in Contemporary Maharashtra

JOHANNES BELTZ

MANOHAR
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You must take the stand that Buddha took. . . . You must have courage to tell the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion—the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste. Will you show that courage?

AMBEDKAR 1979b [1936]: 69

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In the beginning when I sat down to prepare the bibliography for this book I intended to present the documents according to their genre, distinguishing pamphlets from newspaper reports, and Buddhist research articles from other secondary sources. But this attempt became increasingly complicated. On the one hand some of the Buddhist activists wrote scholarly articles on the history of Buddhism, on the other hand, I realized that research works on Buddhism are read by Dalit activists, and incorporated in their

discourse. In other words, ideas and arguments permanently float between these texts which make it often impossible to distinguish between 'inside' perspective and 'outside/objective' scientific analysis. I finally decided to put all written texts into one single bibliography, and hence its present length.

Working on a Ph.D. entails a mobilization of resources. I thank the University of Pune for their hospitality and financial support. The University of Lausanne, the Academie Vaudoise and the De Boer Foundation, Switzerland, provided my travelling expenses. My final thanks to the Graduiertenkolleg 'Religion und Normativität' of Heidelberg University as well as to the German Research Council (DFG) for granting me a three-year scholarship. Last but not least I would like to express my gratitude to Ramesh Jain and B.N. Varma of Manohar Publishers for accepting my work and for treating it with professional care.

Inspite of several attempts, I have not been able to obtain permission to reproduce posters which appear in book as Figs. 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 12. I therefore seek the indulgence of the copyright holders and will deal with any claims in an appropriate manner.

January 2005 JOHANNES BELTZ

A Note on the Transliteration

All Sanskrit and Marathi words have been transliterated without diacritical marks. Their transliteration is based on the commonly used transcription followed in the print media. The final vowel 'a' though silent has been retained. However, in order to distinguish classical Sanskrit terms from their contemporary use, the final 'a' is sometimes dropped. The 'brahmana' marks a varna while the term 'brahman' designates a specific caste group. Geographical names and places are given according to the current usage in English, hence, Bombay is Mumbai and Poona is to be read as Pune.

Abbreviations

AES	*Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, Paris
AESC	*Annales, Economies, Civilisations*, Paris
AIBS	All India Bikkhu Sangha
AS	*Asian Survey*, Berkeley
ASSR	*Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, Paris
AUB	*Aichigakuin University Bulletin*
BAMCEF	Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation
BAWS	*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, edited by V. Moon, Bombay, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1970 ff.
BEFEO	*Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Paris
Bhag.	*The Bhagavadgita*, edited by S. Radhakrishnan, Bombay, 1970 [1948], Blackie & Son
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BSI	Buddhist Society of India
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
Caritra	*Dr. Bhimarava Ramaji Ambedakara Caritra* (Marathi), edited by C.B. Khairamode, Pune 1991 ff. [1952-1987], Sugawa Prakashan
CIS	*Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), New Delhi
Digh.-Nik.	*Digha Nikaya*, edited by J.E. Carpenter and T.W. Rhys Davids, London, 1960-7 [1890], Routledge & Kegan Paul (PTS, 33)
EA	*Études Asiatiques/Asiatische Studien*, Bern
EPW	*Economic and Political Weekly*, Delhi
FWBO	Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

HRWG	*Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* edited by H. Cancik, B. Gladigow and M. Laubscher, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1988 ff.
IAF	*Internationales Asienforum*, Cologne
ICHR	*Indian Church History Review*, Calcutta
IESHR	*Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Delhi
IJSW	*The Indian Journal of Social Work*, Mumbai
IMR	*Indian Missiological Review*, Shillong
Ind. Exp.	*Indian Express*, Pune
ISPCK	Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
JAAS	*Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Leiden
JAR	*Journal of Anthroplogical Research*, Albuquerque
JAS	*Journal of Asian Studies*, Ann Arbor
Jat.	*The Jatakas together with its Commentary*, edited by V. Fausböll, 7 volumes, London, 1962-4 [1877-97], London, 'Routledge & Kegan Paul (PTS, 43)
JMBSI	*Journal of the Maha Bodhi Society in India/The Maha Bodhi and the United Buddhist World*, Calcutta
JRAI	*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.), London
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Cambridge
Khp.	*The Khuddaka-Patha together with its Commentary Paramatthajotika*, edited by H. Smith, London, 1959 [1915], Routledge & Kegan Paul (PTS)
M	*Manavadharmashastra*, edited by L. Sternbach, Varanasi 1974, All India Kashiraj Trust
Majjh.-Nik.	*Majjhima Nikaya* (Pali), edited by R. Chalmers, V. Trenckner and T.W. Rhys Davids, 4 volumes, London, 1960-75 [1888-1902], Routledge & Kegan Paul (PTS, 61-3).
MAS	*Mondern Asian Studies*, Cambridge
MBSI	Maha Bodhi Society of India
MTSR	*Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Berlin
NAWG	*Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, I. Philologisch-Historische Klasse
NZM	*Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, Beckenried
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PED	*The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, edited

	by T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, London, 1986 [1921-5], London, Routledge & Kegan Paul
PTS	Pali Text Society
RESS	*Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, Genève
RPI	Republican Party of India
RS	*Religion and Society*, Bangalore
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
Samy.-Nik.	*Samyutta Nikaya* (Pali), edited by Bhikkhu Kashyapa, 5 volumes, Nalanda, Pali Publication Board, Bihar Government
SARW	*South Asian Regional Writings*, Heidelberg
SB	*Sociological Bulletin*, Bombay
SC	Scheduled Castes
Skr.	Sanskrit
Snip.	*The Sutta-Nipata*, edited by D. Andersen and H. Smith, London, 1965 [1913], Routtledge & Kegan Paul (PTS, 127)
ST	Scheduled Tribes
TBMSG	Trailokya Bauddha Maha Sangha Sayahaka Gana
ToI	*The Times of India*, Mumbai
TRE	*Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Berlin
VHP	Vishva Hindu Parishad
WZKS(O)	*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd-* (*und Ost-*) *Asiens*
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
ZfR	*Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft*, Marburg
ZRGG	*Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, Leiden

1. Introduction

On 14 October 1956 Bhimrao Ambedkar, born into the caste of the 'untouchable'[1] Mahars converted in Nagpur to Buddhism. Several thousand Mahars followed suit in an attempt to protest against their discrimination and exploitation, and seeking a new beginning. Nearly fifty years have since passed and most of the former Mahars now consider themselves Buddhists. This study aims to analyse this movement of religious conversion.[2] Is there a new and distinct form of Buddhism today? If so, how did it come into being? How did it get institutionalized? I have studied Buddhism in the social context of modern-day Maharashtra and in doing so incorporated a sociological study of the Mahar community.

METHOD

Between 1951 and 1961, the number of Buddhists has increased remarkably.[3] I was intrigued by this, since conversion, perceived as a tool of social uplift, was not limited to Ambedkar and the Mahars. I came across the same phenomenon in a study of mass conversions of lower caste people to Christianity. These studies were, however, based on secondary sources and thus incomplete. They led me to study in India, to explore whether these mass conversions are social movements, or are to be seen as religious conversions.

The present study falls under the field of religious studies (*Religionswissenschaften*), a group of disciplines which include philosophical, theological, ethnological or sociological approaches.[4] But religion seems to be beyond definition.[5] Is it a transcendental experience or a way of understanding and interpreting the world around us? Is it a mode of social cohesion or is it a symbolic system of orientation? Over the last few years some radicals have declared that religion is not a universal phenomenon but an occidental creation, and that academic studies thus mainly reflect Western

ideology and values. In my opinion it is futile to enter into a detailed discussion on religion and the significance of religious studies. It would be an unending debate with no conclusion. Having said this, I refer to Axel Michaels who sees a great advantage in this vague and controversial state of religious studies. A combination of disciplines including psychology, history, sociology and anthropology allows for interesting studies into so-called 'religious' phenomena and raises new horizons. I follow Jacques Waardenburg (1993: 87) in this study. According to him religion is nothing but 'a certain quality of some things in some contexts and for certain persons or groups'. According to Waardenburg, the earlier preoccupation of religious studies was to analyse the construction of meaning. In fact, my study is essentially an interpretation of oral or written texts. It needs to be specified that these texts always represent multiple realities and are themselves agents that negotiate, reconstruct, and deconstruct these realities.

First, the vast works and thoughts of B.R. Ambedkar, his role as a politician, as a Mahar leader and as a Buddhist are sketched out (Chapter 2). He is the founder of the movement, its hero. All Buddhist texts refer to him as the ultimate authority and as their source of inspiration. The second axis of research stems out of the first—personal interviews, Dalit literature, pamphlets, songs and poems of the millstone (Chapter 4). Even though symbolic expressions through painting, ritual, architecture and music are sometimes mentioned, this study is first and foremost an analysis of contemporary Buddhist discourse[6] in its social context, in all its diversity and with all its contradictions. It investigates how the Buddhists narrate their conversion, what importance they attach to the changes that followed, and how they perceive Ambedkar and the Buddha. The central notion is *bauddha dhamma*[7] meaning Buddhism in Marathi and referring to a diverse world encompassing the political, the ritual and the associative. This discourse is a protest against social domination considered to be oppressive, unjust and legitimated by brahmanical Hinduism. Stemming as it does out of constant interactions with other socio-religious groups, the collective Buddhist discourse is always relative. Thus the third axis of work is based on relations with other castes, and also on relations with the most important political and religious movements of modern-day Maharashtra (Chapter 3).

In brief, the main objective of this study is to present the Buddhist discourse as an expression of protest and the emancipation of the

earstwhile untouchable Mahars. In this way it is close to the subaltern studies.[8] Instead of looking at the 'lower' castes as mere dependant victims whose destiny is preordained by their oppression, I consider them agents of action and capable of reflection. This approach contradicts all belief in the existence of a systematic hierarchy of castes and a uninterrupted continuity between brahmans and the untouchables, between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Enquiry

Between November 1994 and October 1995 I had my first stay in Maharashtra as part of the exchange programme of the universities of Lausanne and Pune. Two subsequent visits of two-month duration followed in 1997 and 1998. My study was conducted amongst an essentially urban population, with only a small part of the data collected from villages. This decision calls for an explanation.

According to the 1991 census, of the five million Buddhists in Maharashtra, almost two-thirds live in villages. This proportion is in keeping with that of the population in general. Why, then, base one's study uniquely on the city population? The answer lies in what is of prime interest to me, Buddhism along with its institutions and its diverse public demonstrations, as a tool of social emancipation. Of course this movement caught the interest of the villagers right from the very outset. But it is necessary to recall the fact that it was Ambedkar who ignited a rural exodus in the 1920s with his cry, 'Flee the village and educate yourselves.' The village was considered a prison where equality and democracy were denied to untouchables. In fact, migration to cities allowed Buddhists to get easier access to schools and universities and to jobs reserved in government offices—which in short meant social mobility.

I interviewed a total of 299 Buddhists whom I met by chance or through other acquaintances. They were asked to express themselves in their own words on topics like the caste system, Ambedkar, or the Buddha. In other cases I tried to verify and compare previously collected data by asking a Buddhist to reply to specific questions. I tried to cover a vast spectrum of opinions. The interviews were held in public places, during festivals, in temples as well as in the homes, in Marathi or in English. On the whole the interviewees responded in a friendly manner, eager to share their experiences with me. They were so proud of 'their' Dr Babasaheb[9] Ambedkar

that they voluntarily came forward with their opinions. I often contacted them for a second or even third interview. In some cases interviews were difficult. I spent hours waiting for 'very important' government officials, finally getting only brief and insignificant responses.

I spoke to Buddhist men and women of different ages, educational and social backgrounds, such as teachers, students, administrators, entrepreneurs, farmers and slum-dwellers. This included Buddhist employees of the universities of Pune and Mumbai, peons, professors, assistants, and librarians. I generally met them at their place of work. I visited certain Buddhist areas of Pune such as the modest residential quarters of Yeravda and the settlements of Dapodi. In Mumbai I spoke to government servants and workers living in Bandra and in the settlements of Ghatkopar. I visited Buddhist 'holy' places like the area where Ambedkar converted himself at Nagpur, his cremation site in Mumbai, his educational institutions like Siddharth College (Mumbai) and Milind College (Aurangabad). I also went to the ancient Buddhist caves at Ellora, Nashik, Bhaja and Karla. I participated as much as possible in the lives of the Buddhists, and in their festivals.

At the same time I tried to understand how Ambedkar and Buddhists are perceived today by the rest of the population of Maharashtra, in the publications of Hindu nationalists, also observing traditional Hindus customs and rites in order to discern similarities and differences between Hindu and Buddhist practices. I met late Savita Ambedkar, the second wife of Dr Ambedkar and Rupa Kulkarni, Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Nagpur, both Buddhist women of brahman origin. Of the people interviewed in the cities almost 30 per cent were of rural background. It is necessary to mention that most of the interviewees were well educated: more than half of them had a college or university degree. This is a significant detail as it is the first sign of improvement in the social condition of some of the Buddhists. This improvement is also reinforced by the fact that only a small minority was unemployed. Some Buddhists are even high-ranking government officials and university professors. In fact, about half the interviewees do not belong to the lowest classes of society.

It needs to be clarified that the interviewees are more a part of the 'elite' urban society by virtue of their socio-cultural status, and are not representative of the illiterate, poor and marginalized

'masses'. The term 'elite' here does not imply a small exclusive group or the high rungs of society, in general, but the representatives of the movement led by political leaders, intellectuals, Dalit writers and activists. Their discourse is spread through various associations and is published by the press as well as in the form of leaflets and handouts, which are distributed during public demonstrations.

The texts

This study is an interpretation of oral and written texts. While interviews constitute a primary source, the other source is a vast gamut of literature. This includes the works of Ambedkar published by various editors and by the government of Maharashtra and Dalit autobiographies in Marathi. Translations of poems, essays and short stories also constitute a primary source for research. The works of Ahir[10] and Waghmare[11] were sources of valuable information. Moreover I have collected, translated and analysed several popular poems and songs, in other words 'oral tradition', composed in Marathi by Buddhists. Dalit and Buddhist periodicals in Marathi and English comprise *Amhi Maitrani, Mulanivasiyanca Bahujana Baharat, Dhamma Sampada* or *Prabudha Mulanivasi Times, Dalit Voice, Bheem Patrika* and *Bahujan Voice*. I also studied the manuals of Buddhist rituals published in Marathi by individual authors as well as Buddhist associations. During festivals and several demonstrations I collected numerous small brochures and leaflets.

Fieldwork and anthropological naiveté

Ideally anthropology concentrates on the viewpoint of the 'indigenous' person, and the version of his/her world. But in fact any ethnographic account creates an image of the other and finds itself in constant conflict with distance and identification, between appropriation and respect for the other. Each anthropological representation is the product of a meeting, a dialogue, an act of communication, in this case interactions with the Buddhists that reflect their behaviour, thoughts and beliefs. It is necessary to examine the manner in which this information was collected and with what expectations from this study. For instance, during one of the interviews I first asked the person which religion he identified with. But what does it really mean when he replied as Buddhist?

Being Buddhist was of great importance to him, but what did the Buddhist identity[12] mean in the context of his parallel identities of family, caste, profession, class, political party, and state?

I was often made aware of the extent to which my study was considered extraordinary. I had trouble speaking to only one person when spouse, brothers and sisters also were at home. An entire group of people would quickly surround us, triggering off a discussion. A foreigners' visit was no matter of secrecy—such a rare occasion would not allow for a private interview between two people.

A typical situation: I am seated with my 'informants' in the drawing room. The family and sometimes the neighbours gather around. They wait for me to explain my stance, affirm my sympathies for Ambedkar's cause and then ask me if I am a Buddhist. I introduce myself as a *nastika*[13]—this answer is welcomed, for 'we Buddhists are also *nastikas*'. The dialogue is now open. In fact, the people were pleased to be interviewed, proud of the importance they were getting from a foreigner. Many of my interviewees asked me to talk about Ambedkar in Europe. Some of them wanted me to start an association in his honour, I promised them that on my return to Europe I would share my experiences with my family, my friends, my colleagues, and with a large public. I explained that I would write articles on Ambedkar, as he was not well known in Europe. Others asked about my opinion of Buddhism. In Pune, two Buddhist women asked me to perform a Buddhist rite and recite aloud the holy chants.

I often noticed the rhetorical nature of the conversations. There was a strong tendency to give positive and affirmative responses to the questions asked. Many explained that they did not worship Hindu deities. But I discovered in their kitchens that *kuladevata* or other gods continued to exist. Did they want to hide these gods from the visitors' eyes? When I found them, I asked the informants why they responded differently earlier. They seemed perturbed by my observations. They gave excuses such as 'my son bought me these things from Gujarat' or 'this does not belong to us'. They insisted that they no longer worshipped Hindu gods and that these idols were just children's toys or decorative objects. Some of them said only the mother performed the rituals. They pleaded for my understanding—she was so old, and what's more she was illiterate. They were other more conflicting situations. In Mumbai, a group of young Buddhists saw my interest in meeting families who

worshipped Hindu gods alongside the Buddha and Ambedkar. They laughed and suggested that they would introduce me to families that followed the Hindu religion. This experience ended on a sour note as the concerned families saw themselves as exposed and ridiculed.

I once asked a Buddhist in Pune if he had already been to the place in Nagpur where Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. During the conversation it had become evident that he was not really interested in Buddhism. But he replied: 'No, I have not yet been there. But I shall soon visit this place.' When he was asked if being Buddhist necessitated meditation, he said: 'Of course. For the moment I do not practise meditation, but it interests me. I'll take to it some day.' Had I reflected my own thoughts onto my interlocutor? Did he want to please me? Indeed it is clear that my interviews were based on the interaction that took place with them. This holds good for the rituals and practices that I observed.

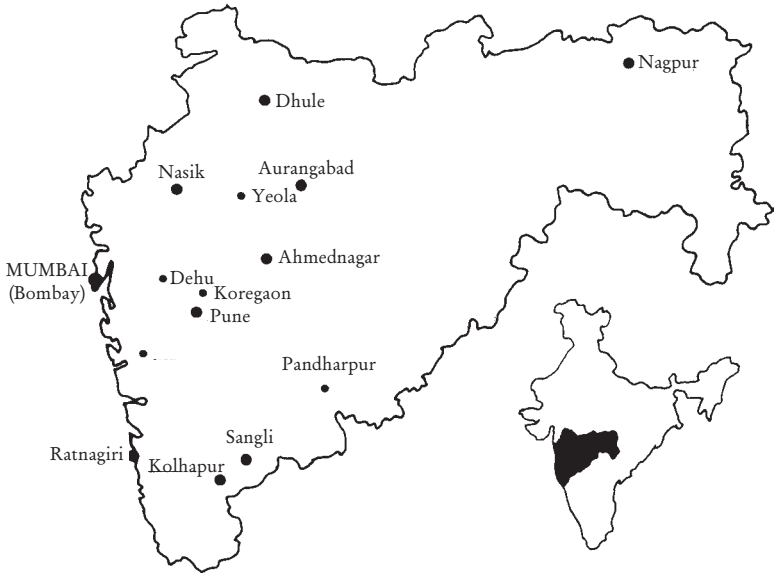

Fig. 1: Map of Maharashtra (drawing by the author).

WHO ARE THE UNTOUCHABLES?

I have used the term untouchables to designate the Mahars in order to bring out the problematic nature of this adjective. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability and prohibits its practice 'under whichever form possible', without chalking out a precise definition.[14] It is clear that the document envisions prohibition of all kinds of discrimination, religious, racist or sexual. But the text is not definitive. It follows that it is not easy to decide who is or is not an untouchable. Furthermore, if, the practice of untouchability is a punishable offence, can the term itself be used? Before answering these questions, an explanation of the caste 'system' in India is necessary.

Caste and caste 'system'

According to various ethnological studies, castes constitute one of the major elements of social stratification in India. I shall briefly describe the numerous social, political, economic and religious dimensions of caste, focusing on the various contradictions that characterize this problem. Other issues are untouchability, exploitation, discrimination and the religious legitimacy of these practices. The objective here is to understand Ambedkar's ideas better and to figure out why the Buddhist movement came about and why it took a particular course.

First, it should be made clear that there is a semantic difference between the terms varna[15] and jati[16] and that eventually confusion could arise from its translation into the single word 'caste', of Portuguese origin. However, their inseparable interdependence should not be questioned on the basis of this terminological difference. The varnas represent a sociological model, a classification of human beings in a functional system. Generally there exist four different main categories, viz brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra. The brahmanas are engaged in studying, teaching and protecting the Vedas. The warriors guard the wealth, protect the subjects and are engaged in politics, whereas agriculture, cattle breeding and trade form the duties allotted to the vaishyas. The shudras work for others.[17] According to some texts, the varnas are defined on the basis of the innate qualities. A brahmana is educated, wise, pure and a master of himself. The kshatriya is known for his

courage (*Bhag*. XVIII, 43). According to the *Manusmriti*, written between the second century AD and the second century BC, in this system the brahmana priest is predominant. He is the one who maintains the Veda, who is born from Brahma's mouth, who is pre-eminent and who conducts the sacrifice. One is born a brahman; one does not become a brahmana, even after higher education, but this does not mean that the varnas constitute a static system. By following *dharma*[18] all can attain a better existence in the *samsara* (cycle of life). A shudra, by improving his behaviour, can become a brahmana and a vaishya can acquire the status of a kshatriya. This explains why men differ in profession, social status, character, and morals or even in their physical dispositions. The varnas form a general and ideal model of the caste (system), however, the social reality is much more complex.

Based on a rather 'naturalistic' logic, India is constituted of a multitude of jatis. The most striking feature about these jatis is that the members generally get married to someone from the same jati or the same potajati (subcaste) and so do their children. In fact, the jatis form heterogeneous social entities, consisting of a multitude of subcastes comprising familial branches of common lineal descent. Many jatis are named after their profession. For example, there exists a jati of weavers and one of sweepers. But the process of modernization has influenced hereditary professions in an important way. Today, members of the same caste practise different professions, in the metropolitan cities as well as the villages. A person born into the caste of barbers (Nhavi) is no longer forced to be a barber by profession. Although rigid professional separation has practically disappeared, social norms pertaining to marriage within the same jati are more or less respected even today.

The relations between the jatis are based on factors like power, subordination, and competition related to the locality, culture, and religion. It is at these levels that hierarchical models are created, negotiated, accepted, assimilated, modified, or rejected. While jatis differ from one another in food habits, clothing, religious practices, and political organization, these differences are now disappearing. In fact, the problem here is to know how caste is being transformed. For example, Susan Bayly (1989) thinks that identities based on castes were reinforced after the advent of the colonial rule. According to her, the fact remains that the British, with their population census, reinforced the idea that castes in India form an exclusive, rigid and

immobile social order. This phenomenon persists even now due to the categorization of the population on the basis of religious communities. The jati, once a superfluous and 'fuzzy' notion, was then transformed into a closed and definitive entity (Assayag 1996; Carroll 1977; Chatterjee 1998; Dirks 1997b; Jones 1979). In that sense, modernization, industrialization, and the liberalization of the market have not contributed to the destruction of the caste 'system'. It is still omnipresent and prevalent in the form of infinite flexible divisions. The policy of quotas has preserved specific caste identities. Today, the notion of caste connotes social class, as indicated by terms like upper class and backward class. Béteille (1997a) states that the caste system does not hold the same significance for everyone and that it does not function in the same manner in all sections of Indian society. Thus the system is not static, but flexible. It is the object of judicial claims and negotiations and hence constantly changes according to context.

Caste is not exclusively Hindu. A sociological study of the Sikh community in India brings out the existence of castes despite an ideology that promotes an egalitarian society (McLeod 1976; Marenko 1974). The Jains are a fragmented religious group, constituting various jatis and gacchas (sects, familial lineage). Their nuptial norms give importance to caste over religion (Sangave 1959; Banks 1996). Christian communities also follow the same socio-cultural ideas (Chaput 1999; Deliège 1997; Fuller 1976; Tharamangalam 1997; Webster 1994). Muslim and Jewish communities constitute several distinct social groups that closely resemble castes (Bhatty 1997; Lindholm 1986; Malekar 1991; Roland 1989). The contemporary Buddhists of Maharashtra constitute a single caste community, that of the Mahars.

Theory and practice

The ancient scriptures mention the existence of people of extremely low social status who are designated paradigmatically by the term 'candala'. The *Chandogya Upanishad*, difficult to place in time but probably older than the *Manusmriti*, explains that sinful conduct (*carana*) in the present life leads to rebirth as a candala. Emile Sénart translates: 'For people who show a satisfactory conduct, there is a prospect of being born as a brahmana, kshatriya or vaishya. On the contrary, those whose conduct is stigmatised have a life of a dog, pig or a candala in store for them' (Sénart 1930: 68).

To which varna do these candalas belong? Do they form an entirely different fifth varna? Kane (1968-77, II, 1: 167-8) thinks that they belong to the varna of the shudras. There are others who think that they do not belong to any varna at all (Ambedkar 1989:165; Herrenschmidt 1996a: 399). As the unanimous identification of the candalas with a specific varna brings to the fore important problems of interpretation, I propose to leave this question open and instead to look at the specificity of the candalas as affirmed by the scriptures. The *Manusmriti* provides more detailed information: the candalas are forced to live outside the village, wear the clothes of the dead, eat in broken utensils and wear black iron jewellery.[19] Based on the degree of impurity they are compared to menstruating women, pigs, or dogs (cf. *M.* III, 239; *M.* V, 85; *M.* XI, 176).

Can we conclude that the candalas are the ancestors of the castes considered to be untouchable today? At first, it seems plausible. The *Vishnudharmasutra*, dated between 200 BC and AD 100, uses the term *asprishya* (untouchable) to designate the impure candalas (Kane 1968-77, II, 1: 173). But the category of candala results above all from a logical classification and possesses a significant moral connotation. Sexual relations between men of inferior social status and women of superior status are judged as against nature. A child born out of such relations between a shudra man and a brahmana woman is considered a candala (*M.* X, 12). For example, a Matang is called a candala because he is the child of a barber and a brahmana woman (Kane 1968-77, II, 1: 80-1). Patrick Olivelle (1998: 209) concludes that the notion of purity and impurity is above all in context with moral and criminal jurisdiction. 'Candalas' would not then designate impure castes, but those expelled from society, despised as a result of moral and social transgression. They are placed in the same category as 'sinners', 'barbarians', and criminals (Olivelle 1998: 199-200). More importantly, Olivelle highlights the fact that the notions of purity and impurity as they are presented in the *Dharmashastra*s essentially concern individuals and their purification. In other words, these ideas do not imply a social stratification. Hence, one should be prudent while drawing immediate conclusions regarding the identification of the candalas in Sanskrit literature as untouchable castes.

Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 22) state that untouchability was established in the second century AD. As texts of that period do not provide the necessary information, it is difficult to decipher the extent to which untouchability represented a systematic and

widespread social practice. The relevant evidence pertains to more recent times. The *bhakti* poets denounce the discrimination against some castes due to their impurity. Cokamela, a Mahar saint of the thirteenth century, who was denied right to enter the temple of the deity he ardently worshipped, is a famous example (Vaudeville 1977). The Hindi word *achuta* is used by Dadu (1604), to designate 'those who pollute the world', the weavers, the tanners and the agriculturists.[20]

The stories of travellers such as Fa Hsien of the fifth century, Alberuni of the eleventh century, or Abbé Dubois of the eighteenth century also confirm the existence of communities considered as 'lowers classes', 'excommunicated', or 'cursed' (Deliège 1995: 26; Dubois 1985: 49-59; Ghurye 1996: 316-17; Kane 1968-77, II: 81-2). The position of these communities was nevertheless ambivalent and exclusion probably was not absolutely rigid. Hiroyuki Kotani (1997b: 74) states that the Mahars and Matangs of medieval Deccan were, to a certain extent, victims of discrimination, but as soldiers and policemen they had a crucial role to play in conflicts and as servants in the economic organization of the village.[21]

For the nineteenth century we have more specific and detailed information on the lot of the untouchables. It is a well-known fact that these castes, victims of social taboo and residential segregation, were forced to live outside the village in separate hutments. They were forbidden to enter restaurants and pass through certain localities. They were also confronted with numerous religious prohibitions as they were denied access to temples and water tanks. Professional services were denied to them: for example, barbers refused to give them a haircut or a shave and the laundries refused to wash their clothes. They were prohibited from wearing footwear or jewellery of certain metals. They were also denied education. Similarly, the right to cremate on Hindu cremation sites was denied to them (Ambedkar 1989: 19-26 and 35-61; Deliège 1995: 141-79; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 44-76).

At this point I would like to focus on the traditional destiny of the Mahars, who constitute the subject of this study. They were the *balutedars*, the public servants of the village, who lived in huts outside the village with Chambhars, Dhors and Matangs. They disposed off the animal carcases from the village and collected wood for cremations. They delivered messages, guarded the village, accompanied visitors and inspectors, and helped the police. They

attended to the horses of patrolling officers, made public announcements, nabbed thieves, and served as witnesses for territorial conflicts. As musicians and actors, they entertained the village. They were agriculturists and in some regions even owned land. The Mahars received fifty-two hereditary rights as remuneration, for example the right to beg or the right to a salary on the occasion of religious festivals.[22] Their diet was looked upon with disgust as they ate the meat of dead cows.[23] A stereotype drawn by the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* (1885) thus affirms that the Mahars had muscular physiques, were filthy and uneducated, and they ate carcass meat, drank alcohol, did not respect moral values and belonged to the lowest class.[24]

The professions peculiar to the untouchables like that of a scavenger, a shoe-maker, a sewage disposal worker, a hangman, a sweeper or a tanner are considered to be highly pollutant as they involve contact with blood, excretion, and death. Similarly the untouchables are stigmatized because they drink alcohol and eat carcass meat, beef and pork. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conclude that all the untouchable castes were engaged in polluting occupations. As mentioned earlier, some untouchables were agriculturists, musicians and actors and they made bricks, worked as servants, delivered messages, assisted the police, were recruited as soldiers. It seems that their inferior social status is rather a result of the loss of the dignity of manual labour. Thus, the untouchable castes differ in their degree of religious impurity, social status and profession.

The notion of impurity calls for some attention because, since Dumont, it has conclusively influenced ethnographic views on untouchability. According to Dumont (1992), the fact remains that the Hindus believe in this hierarchy, with brahmanas at the top and the untouchables at the bottom, each caste in turn following a hierarchy within itself. This hierarchy is not static: it is controversial and characterized by permanent differences of opinion between castes. It should be noted that Dumont proposes the existence of an opposition between pure and impure. It is due to the 'implicit reference to this opposition that the caste system appears coherent and rational to those who are a part of it' (Dumont 1992: 66). 'The contrast between the two extreme categories of the Brahmins, who are priests occupying the highest position in the caste system, and the untouchables', is a manifestation of this very opposition (Dumont 1992: 69). In fact, untouchability is in some way the logical

consequence of this opposition as 'it is clear that the impurity of the untouchables is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the brahmanas' (Dumont 1992: 77). However, although a brahman can purify himself ritually, it would be impossible for an untouchable to do so as he is in a state of 'eternal impurity'.

Many have criticized Dumont's theories, accusing him of promoting an intellectual, elitist, and brahmanical view of Indian society. The systematic conflict between pure and impure makes for fiction rather than a social practice that is universally recognized (cf. Berreman 1993; Mencher 1993; Gupta 1993b; Lorenzen 1987; M. Fuchs 1988; Quigley 1995; Dirks 1997b; Olivelle 1998; Parish 1997). But according to Dumont, impurity does not imply a rigid gap between the pure and the impure. It is fluid and modifies itself depending on the context, being a relative notion and not an absolute one. Nevertheless, I do not think that this code describes all the differences, distinctions and segmentations between individuals and social groups. In fact the aim of this study is to show how the codes for identification and differentiation used by the Buddhists refer to other rationales and oppositions. My focus is on how Mahar converts conceive, articulate, and negotiate their identity, specificity and their collective differences with the society in which they live.

Marginalization and integration

In spite of all the social and legal measures adopted by the Indian government to protect the former untouchables, known as the Scheduled Castes, they remain among the most deprived, and are still the victims of segregation. They do not have access to education,[25] productive capital, land, or work.[26] They are exploited in more ways than one, for instance, as bonded labourers. Gail Omvedt (1994: 48) stresses that the untouchables are not only considered polluted, they are also the most exploited and economically backward.[27] The interdependence of political, economic and religious factors that is characteristic of their plight reflects the complex nature of caste and Ambedkar's plans for their emancipation at judicial, economic, and religious levels.

Does this mean that the untouchables are destined to remain outcastes? Oversimplifying the situation will not help. Marginalization is not as systematic as it seems. In India today, the untouchables are socially and politically mobile (Patwardhan 1968).

Ambedkar himself is an excellent example, having studied in the USA and England and having become an important politician. Rajbhog and Jagjivan Ram will be cited later as examples. Here are four more recent examples of socially and politically successful untouchable politicians.

Kanshi Ram is the first. He was born in 1934 in the Ramdasi community in Punjab, originally Chamars who converted to Sikhism. At an early age, he was influenced by Ambedkar and Phule. His first place of work was the ammunition factory in Kirkee, a suburb of Pune. In 1964, he gave up his job to pursue a career in politics. He founded the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federatin (BAMCEF) in 1971, which was a vehicle for his political ideas. (I will elaborate upon this organization later.) On 6 December 1981, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Ambedkar, he founded the Dalit Shoshit Sangharsh Samiti, which became the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), three years later. Today, this political party is one of the most important in Uttar Pradesh. The majority of its supporters are from among the Chamar untouchables (Jaffrelot 1999; Mane 1994; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 219- 26; Omvedt 1994b).

The second example is closely related to the first. In 1995, Mayawati, a woman politician of the BSP, who, born in a Chamar class of former untouchables is now a Buddhist, was elected the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Her government was supported by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but the alliance did not stay in power for long. In March 1997, Mayawati was elected Chief Minister once again. This time around the BSP and the BJP formed a new alliance in the form of a rotation government. The alliance of the two ideologically incompatible parties, was an interesting and surprising political event (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 226-31). This political alliance again formed a coalition government in 2002 which lasted till 2003. It is difficult, however, to evaluate BSP. It seems obvious that it has not been able to radicalize significantly the Dalit movement in UP, nor to create solidarity or to change in the socio-economic condition of the Dalits. Sudha Pai (2002) uses the expression 'unfinished revolution' to characterize the contradictory situation and recent developments.

As for third example: On 14 July 1997, for the first time India elected a President from an untouchable caste. K.R. Narayanan (born in 1920) in the Paravan caste of the south served in different

capacities such as a professor, journalist, Indian ambassador to Thailand, Turkey, China and the United States. He later on joined the Congress party and was a minister in the Central Government, Vice-President[28] and finally the President of the country.

Ram Vilas Paswan completes this list. He was a Dalit activist and became the Labour Minister during the time V.P. Singh was the Prime Minister. He was the Railway Minister during Deve Gowda's term (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 234-6). As the leader of the Janata Dal (United) that supported the Vajpayee (BJP) government, Paswan was the Telecommunications Minister. In the present UPA government he is the Minister for Fertilizers and Steel.

These examples illustrate a significant political mobility among the elite untouchables. But will this bring these castes into the mainstream of Indian social, political, and economic life? Can one safely say that the marginalization of these castes is disappearing and that Indian society is a lot less polarized and more democratic, as Nadkarni (1997) suggests? Can we speak of social and national integration, as Kakade (1990) proposes? This seems too simplistic and too optimistic. Illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty have always been associated with this class of people. The new economic trend of liberalization does not help their situation (cf. Thorat 1997: 18; Teltumbde 1997a: 27). In the villages, marginalization and discrimination still exist and are the root cause of injustice and violent atrocities. The untouchables often become victims when they revolt against this oppressive status quo (Gupta 1994; Poitevin and van der Weid 1978: 21-39). The Indian press frequently reports cases of massacre, murder, rape and bonded labour.[29] Nandu Ram (1995: 200-16) has shown how an increase in the social mobility of the castes is directly proportional to an increase in social violence: the other classes will not stand by and watch the untouchables improve their lot. Social mobility, ostracism and marginalization of the untouchables, then, go hand in hand.

Dalit: in quest of a name

At this point, we ask, with which term do the untouchables identify themselves? A Chambhar considers himself to be a Chambhar and the same goes for a Mahar who sees himself as a member of his community first. But how did they view their position as untouchables? The need for autonomous representation and a quest

for a common name led to the appearance of a collective identity, towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Terms like *Avarna, Pancama, Achuta, Paria*,[30] Depressed Classes,[31] Untouchables[32] and Scheduled Castes[33] had been used, but later came to be considered inappropriate and derogatory. The euphemism Harijans (Children of God), used by Gandhi was not acceptable[34]—the Mahar found this term pejorative because in Hindi it means children born to prostitutes (Issacs 1965: 41, Moon 2001: 37). Other terms were created. Certain castes were promoted, for instance, the prefix *adi* was used (the first), which signifies the aboriginal status in India (Gupta 1985: 5-6; Omvedt 1994a: 117-19).

In the wake of the Ambedkar movement, the Marathi terms *asprishya, bahishkrita*[35] and *dalita* were often used in combination with the word *varga* (class) signifying a connotation in terms of social class. At first, they were used indiscriminately; the words *asprishya* and *bahishkrita* then disappeared, making way for the term *dalita*.[36] It is difficult to ascertain when the term 'Dalit', which was already used in Sanskrit and old Marathi, came to signify 'oppressed' in the sense of untouchable.[37] According to Zelliot (1992a: 271), Jyotirao Phule used it to connote social upliftment of the oppressed (*dalitoddhara*). In my opinion, it is very probable that this lexical change took place during the late nineteenth century and the term *dalita varga* was a direct translation of Depressed Classes. The Dalit movement, to which this widespread usage of the term is attributed, came into being in Maharashtra during the 1960s to safeguard the rights of the Dalits and to fight for the emancipation of the exploited.

This quest for a common identity reminds us that the untouchables are a social class with a history. During the course of the preceding century, their separate status has become a highly debated issue, attracting protests, allegations and significant political discussions. The idea that the caste system and the practice of untouchability are uniform and rigid should be abandoned. In other words, the concept of untouchability as it is used today by untouchables themselves as well as by scholars is a recent social phenomenon. It is the product of a number of views of ethnographers, administrators, politicians, journalists, and concerned social groups. There exists a dynamic relationship between the study group, its self-awareness and the ethnographic description (cf. Berg and Fuchs 1995). Charsley (1996: 23) deduces that 'the academic debates are more concerned about the identities than the people give them

credit for'. As a consequence I would rather use the terms *samaja* (community), *bauddha jana* (Buddhist people) and Dalit instead of the term untouchables. But the preference for terms that are self-explanatory is not a solution to the problem of the group's cultural diversity. The group does not identify itself with a single term. This subject will reappear a number of times in this study.

Which term is to be used?

Deliège (1995: 19) defends the use of the term 'untouchable'. He is of the opinion that the term Dalit is inappropriate because it is totally 'unknown to the concerned masses' (Deliège 1995: 31). A comment about this statement is necessary because the term 'Dalit' is not as unknown today as Deliège claimed. Though nobody might have known the 'Dalit' concept when Deliège was studying an oppressed group in Tamil Nadu, it is, perhaps, more known today. Both the Indian and Western press had been using the term for some time, with reference to the untouchables in general. However, another more significant problem cropped up. Not all the untouchables accepted the term Dalit. The Buddhists of Mahar origin encouraged its use in Maharashtra but this has not stopped them from condemning its use.

Massey (1994b) offers another point of view. He includes all those marginalized and exploited, like tribal groups and women, in the Dalit category. This is an original and interesting proposition. Could all oppression and social resistance be categorized under one heading? If so, should not one include all those marginalized by society, such as the poor, the orphans and the handicapped? For such exclusion, Poitevin suggests the term *bahishkrita* as a conceptual base.[38] Untouchability would just be one among other forms of exploitation, alienation, boycott, ostracism and banishment. Such indiscriminate use of the term makes it hackneyed and consequently renders it ineffective.

In fact, the fundamental question behind this terminological discussion is whether the 'caste system' is a religious phenomenon or a social one, and consequently whether the untouchables should be defined in terms of their ritual status or social class. Louis Dumont (1992: 103-8) opts for the first solution by dissociating the notion of socio-economic superiority from the notion of status. According to this solution the term Dalit would be a euphemistic synonym for

the term untouchable. On the other hand, Gail Omvedt (1979) and Sharad Patil (1994) reject all dissociation of superiority and status and define the untouchables as a social class. A conflict over the control of profitable resources probably led to their inferior status. The application of the Marxist model of class is, nevertheless, problematic (Deliège 1993: 89-91; Fuchs 1999: 210-19). If one were to lay stress on oppression by the dominant section of the exploited classes, one thinks of it less as a religious phenomenon or at least a phenomenon subject to social conflict.

Perhaps, it is at this point that Ambedkar's stand assumes importance. If, according to him, the untouchables were only oppressed Dalits, why would he want them to convert to another religion? The terms caste and class partially overlap and are intertwined, untouchability being a complex phenomenon with a number of social, economic and religious ramifications. Such an approach helps us understand not only Ambedkar's mind, but also the existence of caste, even today, among the Buddhists, as well as the appearance of radical and more moderate wings and the political and spiritual tendencies of the movement. This implies that the terms 'untouchable', 'Mahar', 'Buddhist' and 'Dalit' ought to be preserved without giving any up. This does not mean they are synonymous. I do not accept the way Jayashree Gokhale (1993: ix) considers these terms interchangeable. They are markedly different from each other because each word has a history and represents specific experiences and identities. The terms ought to be used in combination with each other and if necessary their significance and particular connotations should be mentioned. The title I chose for my work, *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit* evokes this coexistence and a perspective of relatedness. Even though the meanings of some of the terms overlap, they need to be clearly and analytically differentiated in order to find out how they can be confused.

SOCIAL EMANCIPATION AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

In the earlier paragraphs, I analysed the religious and social aspects of untouchability. A number of elements came to light. The untouchables are a heterogeneous group of people and victims of discrimination. They are a marginalized section of Hindu society, unaccepted by that society even though a part of it. These castes

have tried, since the last few centuries and through different means, to make their oppression known and to better their lot. This is where the main issue of my study begins to take shape: Religious reorientation is an integral part of their emancipation. This emancipation, however, need not necessarily mean conversion to a non-Hindu religion,[39] as I argue with the help of some examples.

The first example takes us back to medieval India when people converted *en masse* to Islam. The egalitarian Islamic theology was motivation enough for the lower castes to leave the restrictive hierarchy of the caste system behind (cf. Hardy 1979; Lobo 1993; Mujeeb 1967; Tarafdar 1986). Gonda (1965: 129) believes that with conversion, the lower castes would no longer belong to an inferior class or be outcastes. Also they would no longer be subject to brahmanic domination or social restrictions. The simplicity of this interpretation is appealing, but is it true?

The second example is about the collective conversions to Christianity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India (cf. Kooiman 1982 and 1984; Caplan 1980; Frykenberg 1980; Webster 1994). Untouchables especially asked to be baptized, expressing a desire for reorientation. One could again say that the underprivileged groups reject their inferior position in society and are turning towards a new religious and social identity. Oddie (1991: 159-60) notices an increasing awareness among the Pariah Christian converts about civil rights. The new religion provides them with schools, orphanages and medical assistance, in short, a better future. The missionaries were looked upon as providers of protection and help in times of difficulty. In his study of the Pariahs of Trichipoly, Manickam (1977: 82-7) shows that the building of schools as well as the instructions provided by the missionaries were decisive factors. Joining the mission made a difference to people's daily life, hygiene, dressing, eating habits and ways of worshipping. For the Pariahs, Christianity became an attractive option. The mission offered them the protection they needed in order to better their lot. Conversion signified an alliance with a strong institution, which would defend the members' interests when confronted by members of the superior castes. Thus the main reasons for conversion were a rediscovered sense of dignity and a search for a better socio-economic status (Manickam 1977: 103).

The third example is the conversions to Sikhism at the end of the nineteenth century in Punjab (cf. Delahoutre 1989; Marenko 1974).

In 1881, a group belonging to the sweeper caste, the Chuhra, was the first to convert to Sikhism. According to Grewal (1990: 249-50) this conversion could be considered as an expression of the need for social uplift. The Sikh upper castes still looked upon the converts as 'inferior'. It is interesting to note that another section of the Chuhra caste converted to Christianity. Juergensmeyer (1982) speaks of *competing visions*, collective conversions to Sikhism developing simultaneously with the activities of the Christian missionaries and the Arya Samaj.

These conversions are not restricted to the colonial era. In India today, the conversion of the Mahars is undoubtedly the best known, but it is not the only conversion movement. In Madhya Pradesh, the Chamar groups embraced the Baha'i faith (Garlington 1977). In Rajasthan, the Bhangi groups converted to Jainism (Shyamlal 1992). The conversion of several groups belonging to the untouchable Pallar caste to Islam in February 1981 in Meenakshipuram in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu was much talked about (Ahmad 1984; Wingate 1981; Wright 1988). These Pallar groups were revolting against Hinduism (Raj 1981: 60-3). This conversion was not the result of a conflict between the rich and the poor given that there were no disputes over land. The young activists rejected Hinduism as a mark of protest against the discrimination they faced. The Pallars converted to Islam because they were considered untouchables and were ill treated, scorned and threatened by the Thevars as well as the police. Conversion gave them a new identity and new names and styles of dress. The converts started to learn Urdu and Arabic and stopped eating pork and drinking alcohol altogether (Ali Khan 1981: 38-9). They felt proud, equal, and united. The Muslim community was now the new reference group, and the converts enjoyed an improvement in their social status as a result of their new prestigious image.

Ambedkar's stand

Ambedkar's thoughts on the subject are important at two levels. On one hand, Ambedkar, who belonged to an untouchable caste, was the brain behind the collective conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism; on the other hand, he studied Indian society with relevant sociological tools (Herrenschmidt 1996b). According to him (1979a: 9), the endogamous nature of the caste system is its main char-

acteristic. The caste system is the result of matrimonial exclusivity introduced by the brahmans and has been internalized by Indian society as a whole. Ambedkar understood the ramifications of caste on economic, political and religious life. He knew it was the cause of the endless segmentation of society, restrictions regarding education, and the denial of access and inequitable distribution of public possessions. He was familiar with his community and knew that the idea of caste, legitimized by the Hindu religion, was an integral part of Hindu society at every level.

In his unpublished work, 'Waiting for a Visa' Ambedkar (1993d) describes a childhood scarred by cruetly. At school, he was made to sit away from the rest so that he would not contaminate them. His teacher denied him access to the school well, the barber refused to cut his hair, and the washerman did not wash his clothes. Ambedkar learnt that Hinduism endorsed untouchability and that oppression was legitimized by certain tenets like the *Manusmriti*. In other words, Hinduism and the practice of untouchability were inseparable (cf. Ambedkar 1989: 64-5, 89, 101, 172, 181, 412). An involved and committed thinker and not a neutral sociologist, Ambedkar thought about changing the lives of those marginalized by society. The conclusions that he drew were radical and simple. Since the caste system could not be reformed, it should be destroyed. Thus, according to him, the only solution was to abandon Hinduism.

Conversion however, does not signify only a change in the collective social status. Through this study, I aim to show that the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism was also an act of reforming the unjust, hierarchical Hindu social order, and indeed Indian society as a whole.

NOTES

1. The term untouchable is used here in spite of its controversial nature, as there is no appropriate alternative term available. This is also to avoid complicated structures such as 'the castes called untouchables', the use of capital letters (Untouchables) or the inverted commas 'untouchables'. Cf. the discussion on the terminology at the end of this chapter.
2. I use the term conversion here in its general sense, more or less in accordance with Fisher (1973), Frykenberg (1980) and Bischoberger (1990).
3. See Table 1 in Chapter 3.

4. Refer the introductory manuals of Waardenburg (1993), Michaels (1997a), Kippenberg and Luchesi (1995), Zinser (1988b) and Rudolph (1992).
5. The different definitions of religion that are substantial or functional, structural or sociological in nature are too many in number to be quoted here. Moreover they keep referring to the same conceptual difficulty. Cf. the collective volume edited by Bianchi (1994).
6. See Foucault (1996) and Martin Fuchs (1999: 26-32).
7. The Pali term *dhamma* (Skr. *dharma*) can be translated as 'the Buddha's teachings' or as 'a collection of Buddhist texts', but also as 'cosmological and karmic order', 'diverse manifestations of reality', 'factors of existence', 'justice', 'nature', 'moral guidelines' or 'anything and any state that is unconditioned' (*PED*: 337). The Mahars have chosen the Pali term *dhamma* over the Sanskrit *dharma*. This allows for a distinction between the Buddhist *dhamma* and the Hindu *dharma*.
8. In 1982 Ranajit Guha founded the series, *Subaltern Studies*: *Writings on South Asia*, published in 11 volumes so far. For a more detailed and critical analysis of the subalternists, cf. M. Fuchs (1999: 114-63).
9. A title which means 'honourable father', conferred on Ambedkar in 1927 (Kadam 1991: 85).
10. D.C. Ahir, whom I shall quote a lot, is presently one of the most well-known Buddhist writers in India. Born in 1928 into Chamar caste, in a village of Punjab, he was greatly influenced by Ambedkar and converted to Buddhism in 1956.
11. D.R. Waghmare, a Mahar Buddhist born in 1954, lives in Nanded in south-west Maharashtra.
12. Today, identity is one of the key issues in ethnology, sociology and psychology, not to mention the fact that it is 'in fashion'. However there is a great deal of ambiguity concerning its multiple uses (cf. Assmann and Friese (eds), 1998.
13. Generally, Hindus use this term to refer to all atheists, materialists, Buddhists, and Jains, who do not believe in the authority of the Vedas. Today, this term means 'atheist' in Marathi (Deshpande 1994: 275; Dhongde 1997: 43).
14. 'The enforcement of and disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law' (Galanter 1992: 257).
15. Sanskrit varna designates 'appearance' or 'colour'.
16. The Sanskrit term jati can be translated as 'birth', 'species' or 'class'.
17. The tenth *mandala* of the *Rigveda Samhita* (*RV* X, 90), which is probably the most recent among the other *mandalas*, has a cosmological hymn that explains the sacrificial separation of the body of a human being (*purusha*). This hymn affirms that all creation: the sun, the moon, the gods, the animals and the four varnas unite in his body; 'his mouth became the brahmana, the warrior came out of his arms, his thighs are the artisan, from his feet was born the labourer' (Renou 1956: 99).

18. The semantic field of the term *dharma* is vast and includes notions like law, justice, morale, duty, rules and virtue. Malamoud (1989: 144) defines *dharma* as 'the universal order, the system of norms that manifest it and the whole of the observances that individuals and groups are obliged to follow, conforming to their status, in order to maintain this order and these norms'.
19. Here is an extract from the translation of the *Manusmriti* (*M*. X, 51-6) in Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (1991: 242): '[...] the dwellings of "Fierce" Untouchables and "Dog-cookers" should be outside the village; they must use discarded bowls, and dogs and donkeys should be their wealth. Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and their food should be in broken dishes; their ornaments should be made of black iron, and they should wander constantly. A man who carries out his duties should not seek contact with them; they should do business with one another and marry with those who are like them. Their food, dependent on others, should be given to them in a broken dish, and they should not walk about in villages and cities at night. They may move about by day to do their work, recognizable by distinctive marks in accordance with the king's decrees; and they should carry out the corpses of people who have no relatives; this is a fixed rule. By the king's command, they should execute those condemned to death, always in accordance with the teachings, and they should take for themselves the clothing, beds, and ornaments of those condemned to death.'
20. Monika Thiel-Horstmann, *Dadu*, *Lieder*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag 1991: 237.
21. Many analyses are available on the role of the castes in the village economy: for example, S. Fuchs (1981: 155-247), J. Gokhale (1993: 28-43), Kotani (1997c), Omvedt (1994a: 28-9), Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 297-301), Poitevin (1987: 73-4), Robertson (1938: 18-20), Zelliot (1992a: 55).
22. The Amrutnak myth explains the origin of these specific rights (*vatana*) by referring to the military past of the Mahars. The Mahar hero, well known for his bravery and loyalty, was a soldier in a Muslim king's army. One day, he was assigned the task of freeing the king's daughter from the clutches of the king's enemies. Before leaving, Amrutnak presented a small box to the king to assure him of his honesty. After a number of adventures, he brought the king's daughter back. The king, worried about his daughter's chastity, opened the box and realized that Amrutnak had castrated himself. The king requested him to accept an enormous sum, but Amrutnak demanded fifty-two rights for his community (Zelliot 1992a: 55). Although some Buddhists know about this myth it is not a part of the contemporary Buddhist discourse.
23. Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 5-6) quotes the etymological myth that explains the derivation of the word *mahara* from Sanskrit *mahahari* ('big eater').

Cf. also Daya Pawar 1996: 69-72 and Kamble and Kamble 1991: 245.

24. Cf. the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, XVIII, 1 (Facsimile Reproduction)*, Pune: Government Photozincographic Press, 1989 [1885], pp. 439-43.
25. In 1991, only 37 per cent of the Scheduled Castes were literate. When compared with the rest of the country (52 per cent), one understands the extent to which these castes are marginalized (cf. Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 141).
26. In the early 1980s, about 72.6 per cent of the SC of Maharashtra were landless. Almost half worked as farm hands (cf. Herrenschmidt 1996a: 417-18).
27. In India, about half of the SC live below the poverty line (cf. Thorat 1997: 32).
28. This made international headlines: 'Ein Unberührbarer steigt in das höchste Staatsamt auf', *Die Welt*, 27 June 1997; H. Deosthali, 'K.R. Narayanan: India's First Dalit President', *Dalit International Newsletter*, 1997, 3, 2: 1.
29. For example, 'Dalit Killed', *ToI*, 31 July 1995; 'Teacher Arrested for Beating Dalit Girl', *ToI*, Delhi, 9 August 1995; 'Harijan girl Raped for Affair with Upper Caste Youth', *ToI*, 29 August 1995; 'New Rules to Curb Crimes Against SCs', *ToI*, 3 July 1995.
30. The term *Paria* originally designated a specific caste from southern India, the Pariah. It was used especially by the Europeans (Herrenschmidt 1996a: 400).
31. Social activists as well as the British administrators started using the term Depressed Classes around 1877 (Charsley 1996: 6; Herrenschmidt 1996a: 401).
32. The use of the word untouchable is recent. According to Charsley (1996: 2. 7), two British civil servants, stationed in Rajasthan who were in charge of the census, printed the word for the first time in 1902. The word untouchability appeared for the first time in a document dated 1910. Marc Galanter (1972: 243-98) suggests an earlier date. It appeared, in print, in the Maharaja of Baroda's speech on the 'Depressed Classes Mission', Mumbai, 18 October 1909.
33. The term Scheduled Castes was probably coined in 1932. It was adopted in 1935 in the Government of India Act (Assayag 1996: 381; Gupta 1985: 2-3).
34. As a rule, the credit goes to Gandhi for coining this term in 1931. But, according to Charsley (1996: 8), Narsinh Mehta, a nineteenth-century poet and saint of Gujarat, invented this term.
35. *Bahishkrita* in Marathi means 'placed outside', 'excluded', 'removed' and 'banned'. In 1929, the Bahishkrita Hitkarini Sabha (Depressed Classes Institute) was founded in Mumbai. The journal *Bahishkrita Bharata* was first published in the year 1927 (cf. Gokhale 1993: 85-90).

36. In the Marathi language today, *dalita* signifies 'downtrodden' or 'depressed' (Deshpande 1992: 237; Khanolkar and Sirmokadam 1995, I: 1016).
37. In Sanskrit, *dalita* is the past participle of the root verb *dal*, *dalati*, which signifies 'to divide, to eliminate, to break up, to destroy, to explode'. In Molesworth's *Marathi Dictionary* (1991: 404), *dalita* is translated in the same way as its Sanskrit equivalent. In other words, when the first edition appeared, the meaning had not yet changed. If we leave the contexts of Maharashtra and the Ambedkar movement behind, we find that the other connotations of the term do not refer to oppressed untouchables. For example, the Hindi poem *Vidhava* (widow), written in 1919 by the famous poet Nirala, describes a widow who mourns the death of her husband. She is the symbol of the *dalita bharata*, 'humiliated India' (Suryakanta Tripathi Nirala, *Apara*, New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1993, pp. 55-6).
38. G. Poitevin, 'Dalit Autobiographical Narratives, Figures of Subaltern Consciousness', paper presented at an international conference on biography at Heidelberg University from 13-15 November 1998.
39. Cf. for example the Kabir Panthis (Lorenzen 1987), the Satnamis (Babb 1972; Kumar 1985), the Iravas (Jones 1994: 180-1; Kooiman 1982) and the Ad-Dharm movement (Juergensmeyer 1981).

2. B.R. Ambedkar: Buddhism and Social Reconstruction

Was Ambedkar a politician, social reformer, or Buddhist, or the founder of a new religion? Several perspectives are possible. But it is evident that we are not concerned with judging Ambedkar in terms of a good or a bad Buddhist. True, at the end of this chapter his thoughts should be connected to that of the ancient 'classical' Buddhist texts. This is particularly interesting as some scholars suggest (Fiske 1966; Queen 1994; Rodrigues 1993). But such an approach poses major classification problems. I shall illustrate how Ambedkar's Buddhism fundamentally distinguishes itself from all types of 'orthodoxy', thus constituting a sensitive issue, which might question the notion of Buddhism.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to gain a better understanding of Ambedkar's thoughts, it is necessary to place him in a historical context, the rise of nationalism, Gandhi and the non-cooperation movement, the Hindu nationalist and non-brahman reform movements, and the birth of India and Pakistan. Three remarks are pertinent at this point. Ambedkar was part of a specific socio-cultural milieu marked by British presence; he was influenced by different religious and political currents at various levels; he was not the only person to think of Buddhism, as a real Buddhist revival was already present at that time in India.

Ambedkar belongs to a movement of emancipation amongst the Mahars in the nineteenth century. This is not the place to go into the details of the origins and the development of this movement. The studies of Omvedt (1994a), Jayashree Gokhale (1993), Bhoite (1999) and Zelliot (1979a) furnish a large amount of information in

this regard. Nevertheless, it is necessary to bear in mind that this movement was part of the widespread social transformations linked to the establishment of British power in India, which acted as a catalyst in modernization and Westernization of the country. The modern media, the press, the new means of communication, the colonial judicial system, industrialization, Christian missionaries, and educational reforms are factors that exercised a path-breaking influence on Indian society and contributed to the mobilization of several social and religious movements.

These changes had considerable impact on the lives of the most marginalized castes. The new administrative methods and means of communication, for example, brought about a significant reduction in the area of traditional activities of the Mahars: according to the 1921 census, only 13 per cent of the workers of Mahar origin were engaged in traditional occupations (Zelliot 1992a: 62). Many had chosen to migrate to the cities and worked there in factories, filatures, in ports and in the railways, thus constituting a major section of organized labour (Gokhale 1993: 336). Others sought employment as domestic servants in the service of the colonizers and were—as in the case of Ambedkar's father—recruited into the army.[1] Colonization decisively offered an elevation of social status to some Mahars. It opened new perspectives of action, which were conceptual, judicial, and political in nature. An awakening and a significant rise in political consciousness took place and found expression in the form of new associations and political parties.

At the end of the nineteenth century India saw a significant religious revival. Western ideas of rationalism, moralism, religious universalism, and spirituality were spread amongst and adapted by Hindu and Muslim intellectuals. The Indian Muslim community has seen the birth of modern reformists like Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), who promoted a combination of Islam and Western science. The modern movement in Hinduism adapted itself to the Western concept of religion and transformed it into an integral part of its self-representative ideology. Hinduism was re-invented as a distinct and universal religion, with sacred texts comparable to those of the monotheistic religions; untouchability, *sati*, polytheism, superstition and idol-worship were criticised and abolished. Several movements emerged and were institutionalized: the Brahmo Samaj was established in Bengal and Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83) founded the Arya Samaj in Punjab (Halbfass 1990; Baird 1995, Jones 1994,

Gaboreau, Jaffrelot and Markovits 1994). Several trends emerged—some were universal, some reformist, religious and spiritual, while others were political and nationalist, even extremist in nature.

In Maharashtra, the Hindu revival was particularly militant. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) 'the father of Indian unrest', was a brahman lawyer who in 1894 started the mass celebration of the Ganapati festival as a means of uniting Hindus in their fight against the British rule. By putting forward a nationalistic argument, Tilak denied the colonizers the right to intervene in religious matters. Others followed the terrorist path: in 1897, in Pune, two brahman brothers assassinated British officials. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), born in a brahman family in Nashik, wrote his famous *Who is a Hindu?* in 1923, defining Hindutva as an ethnic, racial, territorial, and cultural entity and identifying Hinduism with nationalism (Jaffrelot 1996a: 25-33; Keer 1988; Savarkar 1999).

Within the framework of this same national militant awakening, Keshav Baliram Hegdewar (1889-1940) founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS—Association of National Volunteers) in Nagpur in 1925. This organization continues to play a leading role in the Hindu nationalist movement. However, what is surprising is that Ambedkar was supported, at least during the 1930s, more by Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha[3] than by the Congress party (Gokhale 1993: 99-105).

The movements of social protest led by the lower castes, including the most marginalized ones, are an expression of the same socio-political developments: increasing differentiation and social polarization, new perspectives for action and political mobilization. In the case of Maharashtra, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-90), who questioned traditional Hinduism, is the most famous example. Born into a caste of gardeners (Mali), he was educated in a Christian Missionary school. He set up the Satya Shodhaka Sangha (Society for the Quest of Truth) in 1873. All through his life, he criticized the cruel nature of brahmanism, speaking up for the indebted peasants, the lower castes and the untouchables, women, widows, abandoned young girls, and immigrants (Phule 1987; 1991a; and 1991b; O'Hanlon 1985; Omvedt 1976; Tikedar 1997). Phule contributed to the rise of a non-brahman movement amongst the Marathas. Maharishi Vitthal Ramji Shinde (1873-1944) founded the Depressed Classes Mission Society of India in 1906 and saw a positive, pragmatic and humanitarian philosophy in Buddhism. Shahu

Maharaj of Kolhapur (1874-1922) promoted education among the people and introduced quotas for the under-privileged castes in his administration, attacked the brahman elite and supported the young Ambedkar (Gore 1990; Keer 1976; Naito 1997; Salunkhe 1994). It is crucial to note that Ambedkar drew inspiration from Phule whom he considered along with the Buddha and Kabir as one of his three gurus (Ambedkar 1997c: 104).

Ambedkar did not choose Buddhism for his emancipatory ideals 'by chance'. If one analyses the historical context, one realizes that in India as well as in the West, there were several streams of thought that found Buddhism useful for their needs. Ancient Buddhist sites such as the caves at Ellora and Ajanta had been discovered. Alexander Cunningham (1814-93) enumerated the inscriptions of Ashoka and carried out extensive research on Buddhist history. In England, philologists like Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843-1922) who founded the Pali Text Society in 1882, edited and translated the Pali Buddhist Canon. In a more esoteric fashion, but in a no less important way, the Theosophical Society founded in 1875 in New York, also contributed to the Buddhist revival. In 1880, Colonel H.S. Olcott (1832-1907) and Mrs Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91) went to Sri Lanka and converted to Buddhism.

In Sri Lanka Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) marked the birth of Sinhalese nationalist Buddhism. This contributed to a severing of ties amongst religious communities from the end of the nineteenth century (Tambiah 1992). It is essential to keep in mind that David Hevavitharana, as he was known at that time, grew up in a middle-class family and was educated in missionary schools—an experience which made him hostile to Christianity. Dharmapala first joined the Theosophical Society; he published the first Sinhalese Buddhist review in association with Olcott. Later, he moved away from the theosophists. In 1891 he made his first journey to Bodh Gaya to take stock of prevailing deplorable condition of the Buddhist holy place. The same year he founded the Maha Bodhi Society of India (MBSI) at Colombo in order to liberate this temple of its Hindu occupation. A year later, the headquarters were shifted to Calcutta, and the *Journal of Maha Bodhi Society* was founded. In 1893, Dharmapala participated in the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago. In fact, he can be considered as one of the fathers of the modern Buddhist revival. He proclaimed a Buddhism that was

scientific, ethical, and altruistic—a cosmogony in harmony with astronomy which necessitates neither rituals nor ceremonies (Dharmapala 1926: 121). Buddhism is a democratic way of life, a social gospel that does not know caste—in short a religion 'par excellence' for the depressed classes (Dharmapala 1907; 1911; 1913). In view of his modernization project, Dharampala re-actualized a meditation technique that he had discovered in ancient Buddhist texts.[4] He thus organized proselyte campaigns, distributed literature, and gave the layman a new place in the sangha.

Though Dharmapala and Ambedkar never met each other, Ambedkar had probably read some of his works. More important, he was in constant contact with the MBSI from the 1950s until the time of his conversion. In 1950, *The Buddha and the Future of His Religion* appeared in the journal of the association (Ambedkar 1955a). Nevertheless, in the introduction to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1992), Ambedkar criticized this journal for being insipid and boring. In a more polemic fashion, he accused the MBSI of being led by Bengali brahmans (Sangharakshita 1986a: 18).

Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845-1914), a Tamil Buddhist pioneer, was born in the Coimbatore region and grew up in the Nilgiris. He was a doctor and an expert in Tamil literature. He condemned all types of injustice and worked for the welfare of tribals and untouchables. In Sri Lanka in 1891, he received his Buddhist orders under the auspices of Colonel Olcott. He founded the journal *Tamilan* and the South India Sakya Buddhist Society in order to promote Buddhism as an agent of social emancipation of the lower castes. His movement was especially successful in the Kolar Gold Fields region of the earstwhile princely state of Mysore (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993; Gros and Kannan 1996: 130-3; Loganathan 1993). According to G. Aloysius (1998: 187), Ambedkar stopped over at Madras in 1950 on his way to Coimbatore to attend the World Buddhist Conference and met the Buddhist delegates of the region. In 1954, he returned to visit the Buddhist institutions in Madras, Bangalore and in the Kolar Gold Fields, in a more intensive manner.

Lakshmi Narasu, a south Indian Buddhist, also greatly influenced Ambedkar. Unfortunately, there is very little precise information available on his life (Ahir 1989a: 112-14; Aloysious 1998a: 65; Srinivasan 1997: 34). We know that he was a professor of chemistry in a Christian college in Madras and was interested in Buddhism.

Narasu was closely associated with the Buddhist revival, as he was a good friend of Dharmapala and a founder member of the MBSI at Madras. He died in 1934.

Ambedkar was greatly inspired by Narasu's thoughts. In 1948, Ambedkar re-edited his book *Essence of Buddhism*, whose first edition had appeared in 1907 in Colombo. In its Preface, he confirmed that he was greatly inspired by Narasu (Ambedkar 1980). In fact, one can draw clear parallels between the two: Narasu (1993: 37) argues that Buddhism places reason at the level of a sacred autonomy. Ambedkar goes on to use these kinds of arguments.

A few more examples are C. Krishnan, a Hindu convert from the Irava caste, who founded the Kerala Buddhist Association in 1920 (Ahir 1989a: 115; Naito 1997: 160) and the erudite Buddhists like Rahula Sankrityayan (1893-1963), Jagdish Kashyapa (1908-76) and Anand Kausalyayan (1905-88) who promoted Buddhism as a just, egalitarian and rational religious alternative for the lower castes. The case of Dharmananda Kosambi is of particular interest as he founded a Buddhist temple, the Bahujana Vihara, in 1937, in a labour-class area of Bombay. In 1940, he published a biography of the Buddha in Marathi, which Ambedkar probably had read. Finally, mention must be made of Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi (1900-71) since he was Ambedkar's Pali teacher for a short while and became a Buddhist activist in Kanpur before he turned to the Arya Samaj (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2004).

Certain intellectuals felt attracted to Buddhism even though they were not Buddhists. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) considered Buddhism an egalitarian and rational religion. Jawarharlal Nehru (1889-1964), Independent India's first prime minister, admired the Buddha for his courage in attacking all forms of superstitions, ceremonies and miracles. The Buddha called for reason, logic and experience (Nehru 1956: 123-4). Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), philosopher and politician, also considered the Buddha to be a spiritual leader, an exceptional intellectual and an important moral authority (Radhakrishnan 1992).

In short, several Hindu, Buddhist and Dravidian spiritual and secular thinkers took to Buddhism, each with his own ideology and objectives. Ambedkar's interest in Buddhism is thus not an isolated case. A product of his times, Ambedkar drew inspiration from the streams of thought that surrounded him. He accepted a few of them and rejected others.

Fig. 2: Dr Ambedkar and the Indian Parliament, poster.

A BUDDHIST BIOGRAPHY

Bhimrao Ramji Ambavadekar[5] was born on 14 April 1891 in a Mahar family in a military camp in Mhow.[6] His father, Ramji Sakpal, worked as a teacher in a British military school. As a result, young Bhim grew up in a comfortable social environment. He completed his school education in Satara where a teacher by the name of Ambedkar, who was fond of his pupil, gave him his name (cf. Kadam 1991: 69; Keer 1994: 14 Kshirsagar 1994: 156). The young student continued his studies at the Elphinstone High School and the Elphinstone College in Bombay, a rare and unusual case in an untouchable's life. The Maharaja of Baroda was impressed by Ambedkar's intellectual prowess and was thus the Maharaja's obvious choice to benefit from a scholarship to study abroad. In 1913, Ambedkar became a graduate and entered the Baroda State Service. The Maharaja offered him a scholarship to study in the USA and Ambedkar left India in 1913. He submitted his doctoral thesis to the Columbia State University Press, New York in 1916.[7] In England and in the USA, he obtained Western scientific training and was influenced by philosophers like John Dewey and Edward Seligman. On returning to India, Ambedkar became a professor of law, an advocate, and the president of a textile union in Bombay. In 1927, the Governor of Bombay nominated him to the Bombay Legislative Council.

The first major protests during which Ambedkar emerged as the leader of the untouchables were to obtain access to water and entry into temples (Zelliot 1992a: 69; Gokhale 1993: 95). The most famous example is undoubtedly that of the Mahad satyagraha.[8] Mahad is a city in district of Raigad today. Since 1923, its municipal authorities had opened up the Chawdar Tank to the untouchables. But in reality, nothing had changed, as the untouchables did not have the courage to fetch drinking water from the tank. Thus a conference of the Depressed Classes was organized at Mahad in March 1927. It was here that Ambedkar (1997a: 4) demanded the abolition of untouchability and the caste system. The participants went to the tank and drank water in public. This provoked hostile reactions from the orthodox Hindus and the higher castes, leading to a big scandal. The tank was purified according to rituals performed by brahman priests and a case was filed against Ambedkar and his supporters. On 14 December, the Mahad Civil Court prohibited

them from drinking water from the tank. On 24 December, another meeting of the Depressed Classes was held at Dasgaon, 5 km away from Mahad. During this meet, they demanded access to the tank again. Ambedkar requested his audience to stop eating the meat of dead animals and to refuse to accept the traditional village economic order. On the night of 25 December, the *Manusmriti* was publicly burnt and equal rights for the untouchables were demanded (Ambedkar 1989: 252-8).

According to Ambedkar, the Hindu high cates would not be willing to resolve the problem of untouchability. In 1928, he asked the Simon Commission for specific political representation for the Depressed Classes. In other words he demanded a separate electorate for the untouchables. On 4 October 1930, Ambedkar left Bombay to participate in the third round of the Round Table Conference in London, where he repeated his demand for a separate political representation for the Depressed Classes. From this time onwards, Gandhi and Ambedkar became political adversaries. Gandhi considered the four varnas as the ideal social order and was against the idea of political representation independent of the Hindu community. On 17 August 1932, the British Prime Minister suggested the creation of separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Europeans, Christians and the Depressed Classes in the state assemblies. This Communal Award provoked a grave political crisis. Gandhi, then a prisoner at Yeravda, began a fast in protest. On several occasions, he had already criticised untouchability as a 'malign growth', 'a crime against humanity' and 'a sin' from which Hinduism had to purify itself at the earliest. But separate representation for the untouchable castes would have totally compromised his programme to reform Hinduism.[9] Finally, Ambedkar and Gandhi accepted separate seats for the untouchables within a common Hindu electorate. The Poona Pact was signed on 24 September 1932.

After this forced compromise, Ambedkar no longer believed that Hindu reformers could improve the condition of the untouchables. He accused Gandhi of promoting the varna system as an ideal social structure. Ambedkar did not want to reform caste system but to destroy it and its entire ideology. In his *Annihilation of Caste,*[10] he explained that Hinduism, as practised in different countries over the centuries, was not a 'real' religion. Here Ambedkar concluded that Hinduism ought to give itself a new doctrine based on liberty, equality, and fraternity and that morality was to be the central idea

of the new religion. This reform would question the traditional Hindu customs and values. Ambedkar laid down a 5-point programme. A new holy book—'normative for all Hindus'—should replace the old *shastras*, the priests should pass examinations and obtain a degree; no priest without a license would be allowed to conduct a ritual; the priest should be a government servant; and the number of priests should be fixed and they should follow specific moral rules (Ambedkar 1979b: 76-7). Hinduism in its present form should be abolished: 'But a new life cannot enter a body that is dead. New life can only enter in a new body. The old body must die before a new body can come into existence and a new life can enter into it. . . . This is what I meant when I said you must discard the authority of the *Shastras* and destroy the religion of the *Shastras*' (Ambedkar 1979b: 78). This is where we see the emergence of a programme for the fundamental and revolutionary reconstruction of Indian society. Ambedkar denounced Hinduism preached in the *shastras* as the basis of the caste system, which had to be abolished. According to him the ancient tradition was not to be observed at any cost. On the contrary, the useful part of tradition that abandons the spirit of caste and promotes social progress should be transmitted. The idea of a social transformation is at the basis of Ambedkar's reasoning. Is it astonishing that Ambedkar considered the British his political allies and the Congress party 'of no use' for the cause of the untouchables?[11] Is it surprising that after the experience with the Arya Samaj and Gandhi, Ambedkar doubted all efforts made by the Hindu nationalist reformers and that he finally gave up Hinduism?

Quit Hinduism!

The rupture with Hinduism became inevitable. On 13 October 1935, during the Yeola Conference, Ambedkar announced that he would not die a Hindu. This speech is generally taken as his decision to convert. Instead of conversion, one can speak of apostasy. It is not difficult to imagine the great scandal this declaration must have provoked (Kunte 1982: 125, 140, 142-3). How can one renounce the religion of one's ancestors? Some Hindu nationalists criticised Ambedkar and accused him of betraying his country. On 17 May 1936 in Bombay, during the Mahar Conference, Ambedkar explained once again why he wanted to give up Hinduism. The following is a

passage from his speech published later under the meaningful title *Mukti kona patha*? (Which is the path to liberation?):[12]

> According to me, this conversion of religion will bring happiness to the Untouchables as well as the Hindus. So long as you remain Hindu, you will have to struggle for social intercourse, for food and water, and for inter-caste marriages. . . . By conversion, the roots of all the quarrels will vanish. . . . [T]his path of conversion is the only right path of freedom which ultimately leads to equality. (Ambedkar 1993a: 9-10)

Ambedkar affirmed that social equality could not be attained if the untouchables remained Hindus. They would never be emancipated, as Hinduism was opposed to all kinds of change. The untouchables would be strengthened by conversion and would thus be able to gain equality, liberty, and a happier existence. The following is a particularly interesting passage at the end of the speech that dates back to 13 October 1935. The complete original Marathi text being unavailable, I quote the translation by Bhagwan Das (1963-80, IV: 61-2).

> Religion is for man and not man for religion.
> If you want to organise yourself, change your religion.
> If you want to gain self-respect,[13] change your religion.[14]
> If you want to create a society which ensures co-operation, and brotherhood, change your religion.[15]
> If you want to achieve power, change your religion.
> If you want equality,[16] change your religion.
> If you want independence,[17] change your religion.
> If you want to make the world in which you live happy,[18] change your religion.
> Why do you want to remain bound to a religion which does not even treat you as a human being?
> Why do you remain in a religion which prohibits you from entering its temples?
> Why do you remain under that religion which prohibits you from drawing water from public wells?
> Why do you remain in that religion which bars you from decent occupation and jobs?
> Why do you remain in that religion which insults you at every step?
> The religion which teaches man to behave with man in an inhuman manner is not religion but infamy.
> The religion which does not recognise a human being as a human being is a curse.

> The religion in which the touch of animals is permitted but the touch of a human being pollutes, is not a religion but the mockery of religion.
> The religion which precludes some classes from education, forbids them to accumulate wealth and to bear arms, is not a religion but tyranny.
> The religion which compels the ignorant to remain ignorant and the poor to remain poor does not deserve to be called a religion.

This speech is impressive for its rhetorical and rhythmic quality. It is in fact a kind of apostasy. It is here that Ambedkar expresses in sharp words the injustice suffered by the untouchables. He begins with imperative language, which gives way to rhetorical questions and theses and ends in a condemnation of orthodox brahmanism and the hypocritical religion that gives more respect to animals than human beings. It is not surprising that Ambedkar was successful in convincing the delegates of the conference to change their religion, even though the question regarding which religion upheld *manuski* to the most remained unanswered. In any case, the delegates jointly decided to renounce Hinduism, to stop celebrating Hindu festivals, to stop worshipping Hindu deities and to collectively convert to another religion (Moon 2001: 42). But the call for conversion equally provoked waves of protest amongst those who wished to remain Hindu (Gokhale 1993: 165).

Ambedkar nevertheless hesitated to convert immediately. Zelliot (1979: 227) wonders if his announcement to convert was a sort of 'threat' to the Hindus. Dhananjay Keer (1994: 258) narrates how Masurkar Maharaj, a devout Hindu, tried to change Ambedkar's mind. At the end of the discussion, Ambedkar promised to delay his conversion in order to give the Hindus another chance to change. Was Ambedkar still not sure about converting? Such a hypothesis is hardly plausible as he was fundamentally against Hinduism. It is more probable that he believed that it was not yet time for him to convert.

After the Yeola conference, Ambedkar received proposals to convert to Sikhism, Islam and Christianity. I have already mentioned that earlier several untouchables had converted to Christianity in south India and to Sikhism in Punjab. Having seen that the collective conversions to Christianity had not completely altered the social status of the untouchables, and that there was still a separation of

castes within the churches in south India, Ambedkar gave up this idea (Ahir 1995a: 66-7; Ambedkar 1989: 426-76). Added to this was the fact that conversion to Christianity would have led to a 'denationalization' of the oppressed classes, thus widening the gap (Keer 1994: 280).

In 1936, Ambedkar took part in a Sikh meeting at Amritsar, but insisted that he had not yet decided on which religion to adopt. According to Keer (1994: 279), he found Sikhism a better alternative to Islam or Christianity. However, even if Sikhism was an egalitarian religion, it was too restricted to the state of Punjab. As for Islam some people saw it as an option (Moon 2001: 40), but it was probably not an alternative for Ambedkar. He saw Islam as fanatical, conservative, and separatist. Muslims observed untouchability and practised polygamy. He doubted their capacity to be loyal Indian citizens, as their religion did not make for allegiance to a secular state. In 1946, in his book on the creation of Pakistan he says:

> Muslim politics take no note of purely secular categories of life, namely, the differences between rich and the poor, capital and labour, landlord and tenant, priest and layman, reason and superstition. Muslim politics is essentially clerical and recognizes only one difference, namely, that existing between Hindus and Muslims. None of the secular categories of life have any place in the politics of the Muslim community . . . they are subordinated to one and the only governing principle of the Muslin political universe, namely, religion. (Ambedkar 1990c: 232-3)

Ambedkar thus went on to favour the creation of Pakistan and defended the two-nations theory. Later, he even called the untouchable castes to come over to India and to stop believing in the Muslim League. He warned the untouchables who converted to Islam that they would not attain salvation through this religion. It is not surprising that this point of view won him favourable reactions from the Hindu nationalists. But it must be noted that Ambedkar opposed the creation of a Hindu India and condemned the exploitative and superstitious character of the brahmanical tradition. For him, Buddhism alone was rationalist, egalitarian and emancipatory and an appropriate foundation for a civil society.

It is at this stage that I would like to add another aspect which I feel is important to understand Ambedkar's move to become a Buddhist. I pointed out how after his decision to renounce Hinduism, he searched for an alternative among existing religions. But as a matter of fact that there was no Buddhist institution or community in India

which he could have contacted which also meant that there was nobody on whom he would have to depend on if he became a Buddhist. In other words, was not the absence of Buddhism in India a sound reason for his conversion? In becoming a Buddhist he would be free to realize his ideas without submitting himself to an already existing religious institutional body. I think that this possibility of freedom in choices and action constituted a major attraction.

According to several modern biographies, which undoubtedly have hagiographic traits, Ambedkar's admiration of Buddhism dates to his childhood. Whatever be the case, he was attracted to Buddhism at least ever since the 1930s. In 1934, he named his house in Dadar 'Rajagriha'.[19] In 1946, he chose the name Siddharth College for the first college founded by the People's Education Society. In 1943, he met Mahasthavir Chandramani; thirteen years later, this monk initiated Ambedkar into Buddhism.[20]

In 1947 Ambedkar was appointed as the Minister of Law and became the President of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution.[21] On the eve of the Indian Independence, the Flag Committee of the Constituent Assembly, which included besides him Abul Kalam Azad, K.M. Pannikar, Sarojini Naidu, C. Rajagopalachari, K.M. Munshi, and Rajendra Prasad proposed that the Sarnath Lion Capital and the Ashoka *cakra* be adopted as national symbols. Ambedkar later proudly recalled how he 'got' them adopted without any member of the Constituent Assembly opposing it (Ahir 1989b: 262; Ambedkar 1997d: 109).[22] Thus, the Indian flag is decorated with the *dharmacakra* (Ahir 1989b: 262; Ambedkar 1997d: 109). In 1950, Ambedkar asked his supporters to celebrate the Buddha's birth anniversary and went to Sri Lanka to attend the conference of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, where he presented his ideas on the fall and rise of Buddhism in India. His paper on 'The Buddha and the Future of His Religion' was published in the same year: He proposed to write and distribute a 'Buddhist Bible' to modify the organization, the objectives and the role of the *sangha*, and to create a World Buddhist Mission in order to effectively spread Buddhism as a religion of morality, liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar 1959: 558). In 1954 he participated in the Third Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the Buddhist Society of India (BSI). In 1956, Ambedkar published and distributed the first version of his 'Buddhist

Bible' under the title *The Buddha and His Gospel*. Then, on 12 May, under the auspices of the BSI, he gave an interview to the BBC, explaining that the Buddha would have been the answer to the Marxist and communist challenge (Ambedkar 1997e: 113). During the Buddha's birth anniversary celebrations at the end of the month, he announced that his conversion would be held on 14 October. Though he was already very unwell, Ambedkar participated in the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Kathmandu in November 1956 (Keer 1994: 507).

A few questions remain unanswered. Why did Ambedkar convert to Buddhism so late? Why did he wait for so long while his interest for Buddhism dates back to the 1930s? It seems as if he did not feel that it was the right time to give himself up to conversion. Did he want to be sure that his supporters would follow his footsteps? Or was he thinking of his political career?

The ceremony on 14 October 1956

The conversion ceremony took place on 14 October 1956 at Nagpur.[23] Ambedkar, who was very seriously ill, probably felt that his end was near. He certainly wanted to accomplish his goal before his health worsened. Why he chose that date is however a mystery. One of the factors in favour of 1956 was that the Buddhist world commemorated the year as the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's *nirvana*.[24] This event is particulary significant since it is believed that at this very moment some great renewal and resurgance would occur (Bond 1992: 75).

Some Buddhists think that the Buddha attained *nirvana* exactly on 13 October. Thus, Godbole (1994) and Moon (1995: 29) suggest that this is the reason why Ambedkar chose this very day for his conversion.[25] If Ambedkar knew about this theory, why did he convert on the next day? Other ideas are also in circulation. In one interview, Waman Godbole who had participated in the preparations for the Nagpur ceremony, reminded me that 13 October was the day when Ambedkar had made his declaration at the Yeola conference, twenty-one years ago. According to Godbole, this cannot be just an accident. Here it is appropriate to mention another hypothesis that seems convincing to me. According to the Hindu calendar, 14 October 1956 coincided with *Vijayadashami*,

the end of the nine-day festival (*navaratri*) that is celebrated in the month of *Ashvina*. Some Buddhists consider this festival the commemoration of the conversion of the Emperor Ashoka. This might have been the main reason why Ambedkar chose this date (Ahir 1990: 98, Patil 1991: 59; Shastri 1990: 18; Shastri 1959: 65). It is difficult to evaluate these theories. Whatever might be the historical truth, many Buddhists today consider Ambedkar a *bodhisattva*[26] and claim that the new Buddhist era began with this conversion. The Buddha is believed to have returned to His native country and the *dhamma* wheel was put into action once again (Ahir 1990: 96). Even though these claims seem to be exagerated, they are interesting as they communicate the saviour's myth: Ambedkar's conversion became an undeniable soterilogical event. Ambedkar is the messiah of the marginalized.[27]

According to Vasant Moon (2001: 149), Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pavar (1989: 112), the conversion was initially to be held at Mumbai, at the Mahalakshmi racecourse. But Mumbai did not have any association with Buddhist history. It seems that Wamanrao Godbole convinced Ambedkar to choose Nagpur instead of Mumbai (Moon 2001: 149). He also suggested the 14 October as a suitable date. Ambedkar accepted. In a speech a day after his conversion on the 15 October, he explained that Nagpur had been the capital of the kingdom of the Nagas, the first supporters of the Buddha and that this city was therefore the ideal location for his conversion (Ambedkar 1993b: 75). It is not certain that Ambedkar knew that the RSS was founded at Nagpur in 1925 at the very same time (Jaffrelot 1996a: 33). In his speech, Ambedkar mentioned an RSS demonstration at Nagpur but insisted that he was guided uniquely by the Naga Buddhist history in making his choice for the venue at that time.

The ceremony was presided over by Bhante Chandramani, one of the oldest Buddhist monks of the time. In ensuring his presence, Ambedkar's conversion perpetuated the Theravada tradition, considered by some the most orthodox and the oldest in Buddhism. Ambedkar was accompanied by his wife Savita Ambedkar, Devapriya Valisinha, the general secretary of the MBSI, members of the BSI, as well as some monks. Bhante Chandramani made Ambedkar and his wife repeat the Three Refuges followed by the Five Precepts, thrice. They threw rice on a statue of the Buddha and made offerings of white lotus flowers.

Then Ambedkar converted the crowd to Buddhism. Several thousands of Mahars, dressed in white robes had come to Nagpur by car, by train, and on foot, to participate in the ceremony (Ahir 1989a: 145-7; Moon and Pavar 1989: 112-13; Keer 1994: 499-504; Rattu 1991: 18-26). Ambedkar made them recite the Three Refuges[28] followed by the Five Precepts[29] thrice. Then he administered the Twenty-two Vows (*bavisha pratijna*), a kind of 'declaration of faith' to the new converts.[30] He explained to the converts which Hindu doctrines and practices had to be given up: worship of Hindu gods, the ancestral rites (*shraddha paksha*) during which rice balls (*pinda*) are offered, and finally all rituals carried out by a brahman. The new Buddhist faith above all propagates equality, based however on the 'classical' Buddhist principles such as the Five Precepts, the Noble Eightfold Path[31] and the Ten Virtues.[32]

Virtues like *prajna* (wisdom), *shila* (morality) and *karuna* (compassion) are re-actualized as central Buddhist concepts. Establishment of humanity and equality is the main objective of conversion. Here is my translation of the declaration of faith:

1. I do not believe in Brahma,Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva) and I shall not worship them.
2. I do not believe in Rama and Krishna and I shall not worship them.
3. I do not believe in any of the Hindu deities such as Gauri, Ganapati, etc., and I shall not worship them.
4. I do not believe in divine *avataras*.
5. I believe that the idea that the Buddha is an *avatara* of Vishnu is false propaganda.
6. I shall not worship my ancestors. I shall not make rice ball offerings to them.
7. I shall abstain from doing anything that goes against Buddhism.
8. I shall not ask a brahman to perform any ritual.
9. I believe in the equality of all human beings.
10. I shall try to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the Noble Eightfold Path laid down by the Buddha.
12. I shall observe the Ten Principle Virtues of the Lord.
13. I shall show compassion towards all living beings.
14. I shall not steal.
15. I shall not commit adultery.
16. I shall not lie.
17. I shall not drink liquor.
18. I shall lead my life according to the following three Buddhist

principles: wisdom[33] morality and compassion.

19. I shall quit the Hindu *dharma* which hinders the progress of humanity, which creates inequality between human beings and makes them vile in nature. Thus I shall convert to the Buddhist *dhamma*.
20. I am totally convinced that only Buddhism is *saddharma*.[34]
21. I believe that I am reborn.
22. I henceforth resolve to act in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha.

According to Ambedkar, this text was to be universally accepted, repeated by every Indian Buddhist. By virtue of its form and content, it represents a sort of catechism summarizing the essential features of Buddhism, the fundamentals of an 'Ambedkarite orthodoxy'. But this text is not only a summary of abstract teachings. It recommends certain acts and prohibits others. It is a plan of action that resembles the biblical commandments. In fact there is a striking resemblance in form between the two. The Twenty-two Vows are conceived as a normative code for a specific religious community. Yet, in practice the two texts are different as the Twenty-two Vows have not obtained a status that is as important as the Twelve Commandments: they are not liturgical texts. They are rarely quoted and many Buddhists whom I met did not even know them. But what is of great interest to me is Ambedkar's intention behind creating such a code, with which the Buddhists could identify and distinguish themselves from Hindus.

The following day, 15 October 1956, Ambedkar made another public speech where he specified that the main objective of Buddhism was the emancipation of suffering humanity (Ambedkar 1993b: 84-9). He revealed his vision of an egalitarian, modern, and rationalist Buddhism once again. Conversion is indispensable to the progress of Indian society, and it is the ideal basis for a civil society. Ambedkar called the converts to follow his example and to administer *diksha* to others.

RE-ACTUALIZING THE DHAMMA

Ambedkar spoke of a modern and new Buddhism that would revive an ancient religious tradition. He did not hide the fact that he had made a revolutionary and selective reading of Sanskrit and Pali texts which he knew in their translated versions. In the introduction

Fig. 3: From birth to *parinirvana*, the life of Dr. Ambedkar, poster.

to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he explains that he wanted to re-actualize the *dhamma*. At the same time, there was an original message from the Buddha, which he wanted to rediscover. This was his second objective. He wanted to reconstruct the 'real' Buddhism, that is what the Buddha had preached. How does one link these seemingly scientific and rational presumptions? Should Ambedkar be accused of fundamentalism? Or is it simply a pure rhetorical argument that legitimizes his ideas? This is probably true as he reevaluates his own ideas at various stages saying that his conclusions are not definitive and that they may be questioned.

Ambedkar first remarks that the Buddha's teachings were constantly modified over the centuries, and one must distinguish between the true teachings of the Buddha and those that were added later. He (1992: 350-1) laid down three criteria in order to verify if the teaching was originally preached by the Buddha: it should be logical and rational; all that goes against human welfare cannot thus be an idea that came from the Buddha; the Buddha distinguished the opinions he was sure of from the hypotheses he was not sure of; he affirmed ideas of which he was convinced and hesitated to pronounce himself on those he was unsure of. These are the three principle arguments that enabled Ambedkar to identify the authentic elements. It is through this framework that he rejected all that what did not correspond with his idea of a Buddhism that was social, egalitarian, and reformatory in its character.

The Buddha

For Ambedkar, the Buddha was not a god or a prophet. This is one of the major differences that distinguishes Buddhism from any other religion.[35] The Buddha never claimed divine status. He never claimed to have supernatural powers. He was a historical character concerned with showing mankind the path to salvation. More important by, he gave his disciples the liberty to question and to modify his teachings (Ambedkar 1959: 1-2).

Ambedkar reconstructed the Buddha's life from the *Suttapitaka*,[36] the *Buddhacarita*[37] and the works of Paul Carus, Lakshmi Narasu and Edward Thomas. He presented the Buddha in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a very good-looking man with a gentle voice and a perfect character; admired by one and all (Ambedkar 1992: 567-70). It is necessary to keep in mind that despite the strong rational position

adopted by Ambedkar, the description of the Buddha is in the same religious and devotional language as the English versions of the ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts. Yet the content has changed: the Buddha represents the ideal, humanist, knowledgeable, tolerant and compassionate leader, who is committed to the cause of the ill and the marginalized. He detested all forms of inequality and poverty (Ambedkar 1992: 573-84).

In his programme of the total and radical re-actualization of Buddhism, Ambedkar modified certain details of the Buddha's life. The most striking example is that of his renouncement. According to old legends, the Buddha left his family and his house to go in search of liberation after the painful experience of coming across an old man, a sick man, and a dead man (Klimkeit 1990: 67-74). However, according to Ambedkar, his reason for renouncing the world is absurd.[38] He proposed another solution. When the Buddha was twenty-eight, a conflict broke out between the Shakyas, the Buddha's clan, and the Koliyas, their neighbours and relatives. They had continuous disagreements on who should use the water of the river Rohini that separated the two kingdoms.[39] The conflict turned violent and claimed many victims and the Shakyas declared war on the Koliyas. Ambedkar situates the Buddha's decision to renounce the world at this very moment, as he was opposed to the declaration of war, which was not a solution in his view. Only love could solve the problem, but the Shakyas refused to pay head to his proposal and the Buddha rejected the idea of moving his armies. When he was threatened by his own clan, he decided to renounce the world (Ambedkar 1992: 24-32).

This rational and simple hypothesis seems plausible. The Buddha's refusal to enter into a war that was unjust and inappropriate corresponds perfectly to the idea of a Buddhism committed to social welfare as envisaged by Ambedkar. The figure of the young prince Siddhartha Gautama who takes an active part in the political affairs of his time is more interesting than that of a prince who renounces the world on his first encounter with human suffering. However, from a scientific point of view Ambedkar's idea is not convincing. His biography of the Buddha is not based on serious philological or historical studies, but is instead a liberal reconstruction and a new interpretation. Ambedkar wants to construct the figure of an ideal social reformer, of a new Buddha! In this way, his hypotheses on the Buddha's life are less significant in terms of their historical

authenticity and are more an expression of his admiration for the Buddha.[40]

Liberty, equality and fraternity

The teachings of the Buddha that are canonized in the Pali texts have undoubtedly ethical ramifications. Prior to Ambedkar, Lakshmi Narasu and other modern Buddhist thinkers had, on several occasions, re-actualized the importance of morality in Buddhism. This was a widely discussed topic and one of the fundamental notions of Buddhist revival. Ambedkar was greatly inspired by it. For him, morality is a fundamental Buddhist notion. 'In fact, it might be stated that the Buddha was the first teacher in the world who made morality the essence and foundation of religion' (Ambedkar 1995a: 32). Ambedkar goes beyond this. He refuses even to speak of Buddhism as a religion and prefers to use the word *dhamma*, which he defines exclusively in terms of a principle of morality and social justice:

> What is the place of morality in Dhamma? The simple answer is morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is morality. In other words, in Dhamma morality takes the place of God although there is no God in Dhamma. In Dhamma there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices. Morality is the essence of Dhamma. Without it there is no Dhamma. (Ambedkar 1992: 322-3)

Ambedkar rejects the modern idea according to which religion is a personal affair. The Buddha's *dhamma* is a kind of social contract regulating the relations between humans in their private and public lives. According to him:

> Religion, it is said, is personal and one must keep it to oneself. One must not let it play its part in public life. Contrary to this, Dhamma is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so. Dhamma is righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life. From this it is evident that one man if he is alone does not need Dhamma. But when there are two men living in relation to each other they must find a place for Dhamma whether they like it or not. Neither can escape it. In other words, Society cannot do without Dhamma. (Ambedkar 1992: 316)

According to Ambedkar no society can survive without morality or religion. Buddhism is the central ethical principle of a liberal and civil society and Ambedkar recognizes the necessity of moral and religious principles without giving up the notion of religion.

According to him, the Buddha preached social, intellectual, economic and political liberty, as well as equality amongst human beings and the two sexes. The three fundamental principles of his philosophy are liberty, equality, and fraternity. In an interview that he gave on 3 October 1954 to All India Radio, he explains: 'My social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words liberty, equality, and fraternity. Let no one however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha' (Ambedkar 1997c: 101). Ambedkar legitimizes this idea in Buddhism. The Buddha and not the French revolution were to be his ultimate authority. He adapted this formula to affirm the Indian origins of his philosophy. Irrespective whether this was a conscious choice or not, Ambedkar can present Buddhism as an Indian social philosophy that aims at establishing justice for all mankind. 'The kingdom of righteousness lies on earth and is to be reached by man by righteous conduct. What he [the Buddha] did was to tell people that to remove their misery each one must learn to be righteous in his conduct in relation to others and thereby make the earth the kingdom of righteousness' (Ambedkar 1992: 283). Justice means social equality. The Buddha had made equality one of the bases of his teachings. 'The Buddha was the strongest opponent of caste and the earliest and staunchest upholder of equality. There is no argument in favour of caste and inequality which he did not refute' (Ambedkar 1992: 302). In order to illustrate his argument, Ambedkar cites the *Assalayanasutta*, (*Majjh.-Nik*. II, 147-57), the *Vasetthasutta* (Snip. 112-20) and the *Esukarisutta* (*Majjh.-Nik*. II, 177-84) of the Pali canon.

In these texts, on the one hand, the Buddha declares that all human beings are equal by birth, and on the other hand, he says that *karma* causes all differences between humans. However, there is no biological or moral criterion that differentiates a kshatriya, a brahmana, a vaishya, a shudra or a candala. But would we be going too far in attributing revolutionary and egalitarian intentions to the Buddha just as Ambedkar does? Can one really consider Buddhism as one of the first anti-caste movements in India (Thapar 1990: 68)? A unanimous reply to this question is difficult as the Buddha's reasoning, as transmitted in the Pali texts, remains ambiguous on caste. The Buddha declared that mankind, irrespective of its origins, has the same opportunity of leading a happy life. In the *Vasalasutta*,[41]

he explains how a man from a lower caste can reach the highest position and attain Brahma's world after his death, just as the brahmanas who are guilty of performing bad deeds will be disregarded throughout their lives and will be reborn in misery. The Buddha calls all humanity to come forward to be liberated from the suffering of the world. The entire varna ideology is based on individual morals and ethics. What is of interest to the Buddha is not the essence of things but their functioning and question of knowing how one can attain liberation.[42] This does not mean that he questioned the existence of the varnas. According to Lingat (1989: 89), the Buddha does not specify anywhere how 'the secular society should be organized' and 'though he condemns it and denies its religious value, he accepted this system as it operated before him'. Other voices are even more critical: according to Wijayaratna (1990: 119), the Buddha did not want a 'social revolution, nor did he want to instigate the oppressed against their oppressors'. Bechert (1966-73, I: 8) confirms that the (classical) Buddhist doctrine hardly expresses the necessity to transform the society or improve the social conditions. Bechert reminds us that the Buddha essentially denies the varnas within the monastic order.

Thus, there is no clear reply to the question of whether the Buddha was for or against caste. Richard Gombrich (1991b: 31) thinks that it is legitimate to re-actualize the Buddha's tradition as Ambedkar did. But it would be necessary to accept that the Buddha himself never preached in such a manner. But it is certain that Ambedkar's arguments are not those of a philologist but of a social reformer who re-actualizes this age-old tradition in a radical manner. However, he is not the only one to do so: before him Dharmapala (1907, 1911, and 1913) and Narasu (1993: 70-88) had already advocated same interpretation. More importantly, the egalitarian and anti-caste values form a central part of the modern and contemporary Buddhist discourse (Kariyawasam 1971: 691; Kausalyayan 1992; Dhammaratna 1994).

The Four Noble Truths

It is generally believed that the Buddha revealed the Four Noble Truths during his 'first' sermon, as the heart of his teachings (Rahula 1978: 35; Klimkeit 1990: 161; Mehlig 1987, 2: 115-22). According to these truths, human life is full of misery (Pali *dukkha*, Sanskrit

duhkha), as desire (Pali *tanha*, Sanskrit *trishna*) is at the root of all suffering. The cause-effect[43] relationship promotes continuity in existence; birth, old age and death are only transitory, impermanent, perishable and momentary stages.

This is yet another difference: for Ambedkar, the Four Noble Truths being the basis of misery were not the original teachings of the Buddha. This doctrine is supposed to have been added by his disciples after his death. Ambedkar is against the idea that Buddhism is a negative and pessimistic philosophy, an interpretation often proposed by Western scholars.[44] He questions the whole argument of these truths. If life, death, and birth, in short, all existence, represents and is the cause of suffering, there is no hope. But the Buddha preached hope and not despair. This is why Buddhism should be seen as a 'gospel', that is the means to escape from this suffering. According to Ambedkar it is impossible to associate Buddhism with pessimism as the Buddha's *dhamma* is an 'optimistic' message based on two principles: understanding (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*). It is in this context that the notion of 'suffering' (*dukkha*) should be placed. It should be thought of not as a fact but as a challenge to humanity. In fact, this human suffering should be eliminated in its entirety. This is possible since it is a phenomenon of the material and the social world (Ambedkar 1992: 511). The Buddha showed the path leading to liberation from this suffering. For Ambedkar, the notion of *dukkha* does not have esoteric dimensions, as the concepts of penitence, reincarnation, and the soul are absent. The virtues or the sins of the past lives are not responsible for the present social status of a person.

Karma and kamma

According to the Buddhist texts, *karma* (Pali *kamma*) literally meaning 'act' or 'voluntary action' is undoubtedly one of the most important and most controversial notions. The application and functioning of this concept are largely debated in a manner that varies from one school of thought to another. A deep and detailed interpretation of this concept is complicated and would necessitate a separate study in itself. According to Rahula (1978: 53) who refers exclusively to the Pali Canon, *kamma* should be differentiated from result (*vipaka*) and effect (*phala*). A good *kamma* leads to good effects and a bad *kamma* brings in unfavourable results. This leads to the

continuity in the circle of life. It is thus in principle a theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction. In his approach Ambedkar applies the same logic. He reiterates that Buddhism does not accept the idea of an eternal soul:

> The Hindu Law of Karma is based on the soul. The Buddhist is not. In fact there is no soul in Buddhism. The Brahmanic Law of Karma is hereditary. It goes on from life to life. This is so because of the transmigration of the soul. This cannot be true of the Buddhist Law of Karma. This is also because there is no soul. (Ambedkar 1992: 337-8)

As there is no soul, there is no *karma* to inherit. 'The Buddha's Law of Karma applied only to Karma and its effect on present life' (Ambedkar 1992: 338). According to Ambedkar, *kamma* is different from its Sanskrit counterpart as it neither determines birth, nor social status, nor the individual's destiny. Ambedkar denies that the *kamma* influences a person's life. According to him, *kamma* replaces the function of god in traditional religions. The *kamma* is a moral principle: 'The Law of Kamma has to do only with the question of general moral order. It has nothing to do with the fortunes or misfortunes of an individual. It is concerned with the maintenance of the moral order in the universe' (Ambedkar 1992: 245).

Ambedkar radicalizes the notion of *kamma* by interpreting it in terms of universal rationalism and moralism. He thus rejects the idea of predestination and defeatism. For him, freedom of thought and action and the right to self-determination are the essential Buddhist values. They are important for all religious reasoning or principle as religion is made for man, man does not live for religion. It is clear that Ambedkar radicalizes the Buddha's reasoning in this area.

Bechert (1966-73, I: 8) and others refuse to accept such an interpretation, arguing that the *kamma* accumulated over several previous lives is the reason why human beings are born into different social classes. The Buddha would have plainly denied that the dispositions of an individual would be determined by exterior conditions.[45] In fact, it had been shown that the Buddha had not denied the existence of the varnas. He had firmly criticized the idea that varnas are determined by birth. According to him, there was only one species of men. Differences arise out of *kamma* and ethical conduct. Thus the Buddha did not want to legitimize or defend the *status quo*. It would thus be difficult to conclude that a man born in

a lower caste was being 'punished' for the sins he committed in his previous life. According to Rahula (1978: 54), the *kamma* theory can hardly be identified with notions of recompense, as its ideas are not fatalist and its ethics concern the present life. In fact, the Buddha's thoughts are pragmatic: he was concerned with the question of abandoning this imperfect and miserable world.

Rebirth

Kamma is directly linked to the problem of birth. How does Ambedkar's radicalism determine his reasoning on this issue? In order to gain a better understanding of his ideas, it is first necessary to sketch out the problem as it is presented in the ancient Pali texts (Mehlig 1987: 279-92). Generally, these texts do not accept the idea of a self that is reborn (*atta*) or of a substance that continues to exist. What happens when death strikes? Will, desire, the thirst to live on, to continue, to evolve, are forces that continue to act after physical death, by manifesting themselves in other forms, thus leading to another existence. This is why one must stop accumulating *kamma* and liberate oneself from the thirst of perpetuating. Here an important question arises. Is not the absence of an individual soul as postulated under the *anatta* principle against the very idea of rebirth? Who is reborn? The reply to this question has already been the preoccupation of ancient Buddhist thinkers; several schools have proposed different solutions. Alexander von Rospatt (1995) describes, for example, how the *yogacara* school defines human existence as a combination of five *skandhas*,[46] a combination of physical and mental energies which change continuously, are born, and die every instant (*kshana*). As a result, man is born, dies, takes rebirth, throughout his life without a permanent immutable, eternal substance. Rebirth is thus a result of cause and effect, it is a continuity of impulsions.

Ambedkar distinguishes between the concept of transmigration and of rebirth. In his view (Ambedkar 1992: 330-2), the Buddha has nowhere preached of the rebirth of a soul but of the regeneration of matter, which is a scientifically valid concept. During each birth, the natural elements reunite; life is regenerated, as energy is indestructible and eternal. The central point of this theory is the absence of continuity and of reward in the new life. Rebirth as it is conceptualized by Ambedkar is not a soteriological notion. Ambedkar rejects all divine transcendence and talks of a de-

spiritualization and de-psychologization of Buddhism in order make it into a moral and social emancipation.

Nibbana

The term *nibbana* (Sanskrit *nirvana*), literally meaning 'quenching' or 'extinction', is another key notion in the Buddhist philosophy as interpreted in an extremely different manner by diverse schools (Kalupahana 1994: 90-100; Harvey 1990: 60-8). The Pali texts describe it in the negative sense as the extinction of hatred, of illusion, eradication of attachments, destruction and abandonment of desire, end of continuity and of evolution. According to Rahula (1978: 57), it refers to the *summum bonum*, the Buddhist 'Ultimate Reality', the 'Absolute Truth'.

Ambedkar explains that this notion is greatly different from Hindu soteriology as it is not a transcendental concept. *Nibbana* thus cannot be compared to salvation of the soul; it can be translated as happiness and can be attained in the present life by following the Noble Eightfold Path. It implies control over emotions and a procedure allowing continuing on the path of justice. In other words, *nibbana* is the objective of a righteous life. It thus concerns the present life of an individual. Ambedkar distinguishes between *nibbana* and *parinibbana* (Sanskrit *parinirvana*), signifying death and complete extinction. The human body is solvent, perceptions stop, sensations die, activities come to a stand still, and the consiousness leaves (Ambedkar 1992: 234-7).

The sangha

In *The Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, Ambedkar presents his principle ideas.

> Is the Bhikshu Sangha of today living up to these [Buddhist] ideals? The answer is emphatically in the negative. It neither guides the people nor does it serve them. The Bhikshu Sangha in its present condition can therefore be of no use for the spread of Buddhism. In the first place there are too many Bhikshus. Of these a very large majority are merely Sadhus and Sannyasis spending their time in meditation or idleness. There is in them neither learning nor service. (Ambedkar 1995a: 41)

Ambedkar criticizes the present condition of the sangha in the Asian

countries. According to him, the objective of the sangha is different. It is a 'model of a society realizing the Dhamma preached by the Blessed Lord' (Ambedkar 1992: 434). It is a social and moral order. As a consequence, the monks are neither simple ascetics, nor are they beggars. Free from all preoccupation, they are totally dedicated to the service of mankind. The *bhikkhu* leaves his house but does not renounce the world. He leaves it in order to able to serve better the miserable and under-privileged people who cannot escape their condition on their own (Ambedkar 1992: 435). Ambedkar explains that the poverty of the monks is necessary for their mission but is not a Buddhist merit. Ambedkar sees the *bhikkhu* as a kind of social worker and not an ascetic. The sangha represents an intellectual elite whose members are completely dedicated to the service of mankind and who are free from all preoccupation. In this way, the 'Bhikshu Sangha must borrow some of the features of the Christian priesthood particularly the Jesuits' (Ambedkar 1995a: 41). However Ambedkar does not question the sangha in itself when he adopts a revolutionary approach. He only points a finger at its present functioning. He re-actualizes a certain part of the ancient monastic code (*vinaya*) as normative, for example the guidelines regarding clothing and conduct (Ambedkar 1992: 417-21).

The origin of untouchability and the history of Buddhism

Ambedkar devised a theory, based on anthropological data, of the origin of untouchability, which he linked to the disappearance of Buddhism in India. This is a brief account of the ideas he puts forward in *The Untouchables: Who they Were and Why they Became Untouchables* published for the first time in 1948. The untouchables were earlier the broken people, sections of defeated tribes. They were victims of war, refugees whose community structure was weakened or even destroyed. These people went in search of a new refuge and approached sedentary tribes. They protected the villagers and were in return sustained by them. This relationship was at the root of the fifty-two traditional rights of the Mahars (Ambedkar 1990b: 274-7). How did these broken men become untouchables? It is here that Ambedkar introduces the conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism. In his opinion the brahmans lost their superior position due to competition from the Buddhists. In order to gain dominant status, the brahmans decided to become vegetarian, to

prohibit beef-eating and to reject the Buddhists (Ambedkar 1990b: 346). As a result the Buddhist broken men who ate beef like the rest of the world, were stigmatized as 'impure'. This is how untouchability came into being around AD 400 (Ambedkar 1990b: 379).

Ambedkar (1987c) analyses the rivalry between Buddhism and brahmanism in terms of a revolution and counter-revolution, as a conflict of progressive and regressive forces. Converting to Buddhism would thus be a mark of social protest, a re-conversion to the original religion of the untouchables. In other words, Ambedkar finds a coherent and original explanation to untouchability within the framework of his historical quest. In linking the disappearance of Buddhism in India to the appearance of untouchability, he follows the principle according to which the present is rooted in the past. Is this re-actualization a purely ideological interpretation as is Srinivasan's (1996: 89) opinion? Such a judgement appears incorrect and too simplistic. A trained anthropologist, Ambedkar adopted an explicit scientific perspective. It would be unjust to overlook his detailed sociological analyses in *The Caste System in India* (cf. Herrenschmidt 1996b). He discusses the diverse theories that were circulating during that time regarding the origin of untouchability. He has also made some pertinent proposals. For example, he rejects the hypothesis that the 'racial' difference between the brahmans and the untouchables was the basis of untouchability (Ambedkar 1990b: 289-304). It would thus be incorrect to accuse him of wanting to distort history.

Buddhism and communism

Ambedkar compares Buddhism to communism with reference to the principle of equality. There are two texts where Ambedkar discusses this question in great detail. The first is 'Buddhism and Communism', a paper read at the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Kathmandu in 1956.[47] The second is 'Buddha or Karl Marx?' which was written in December 1956 and is probably the reworked and detailed version of the Kathmandu presentation (Ambedkar 1993c and 1987c). In these works, Ambedkar articulated strong resentment against the communists. But it is difficult to say what he really thought of their ideas, and

whether he had studied Karl Marx. In my view, his negative judgement is explained by the historical context. The year 1956 was was marked by the brutal oppression of the revolt in Hungary—an event that Ambedkar could not have approved of. Apart from this, his work also has a significant apologetic strain: the objective seems to be to show how Buddhism is preferable to Marx and how it is superior to communism.

As the Buddha had already preached eradication of poverty, there is no need to look for this idea in Marx, even though the old *sangha* had already abolished the right to private property (Ambedkar 1993c: 67-88). It is essentially the aspect of non-violence (*ahimsa*) that distinguishes Buddhism from communism. According to Ambedkar, the Buddha never used force or violence to promote his ideas. It is out of love and persuasion that he convinced others to adopt his teachings. However the Buddha's *ahimsa* is not similar to that of Gandhi. It signifies loving the person and can provoke the use of violence if it is preventive in nature. For Ambedkar Buddhism is the middle path between Jainism and Hinduism, between non-violence and violence. Buddhism is not a religion made of laws but a religion based on principles (Ambedkar 1992: 347). *Ahimsa* is thus a principle and not a law that must be followed. The establishment of a proletariat dictatorship is another argument against the communist regime. Ambedkar is against dictatorship as it nullifies democratic rights of the people.

> The Russians do not seem to be paying any attention to Buddhism as an ultimate aid to sustain Communism when force is withdrawn. The Russians are proud of their communism. But they forget that the wonder of all wonders is that the Buddha established Communism so far as the sangh was concerned without dictatorship. It may be that it was communism on a very small scale but it was communism without dictatorship a miracle which Lenin failed to do. (Ambedkar 1987c: 461)

Ambedkar (1993c: 69) concludes that Buddhism is democratic and does not allow the establishment of a totalitarian regime. The Buddha wanted to change people's mindsets without using force: 'The Buddha's way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise do' (Ambedkar 1987c: 461). Ambedkar is an idealist visionary and a democrat. Dictatorship is not a good form

of government as it negates values such as equality, liberty, and fraternity. Ambedkar thinks that the co-existence of these three principles can be realized only by following the Buddha's path. Communism would destroy these values. Another point that has already been mentioned is the fact that Ambedkar distances himself from militant atheism as he sees it preached and practised by communist countries. He definitely sympathizes with the modern rationalist and scientific thinking but he considers religion one of the bases of social life.

RUPTURES, REFORMS AND INNOVATIONS

At the beginning of this chapter, I spoke of various schools of thought and social movements, which inspired Ambedkar. He was influenced by the rationalism of his time, by the non-brahman movement, and by the Hindu renaissance. But the movement that influenced him the greatest was the Buddhist revival also known as 'Buddhist Modernism' (Bechert 1966-73: I, 37-42) or 'Protestant Buddhism' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 218). The modernist Buddhists turned towards an attachment with the world. They promoted a politicization of Buddhism (and were often at the origin of fundamentalist trends). Their knowledge of ancient Buddhism was essentially based on Western sources and English translations of the scriptures. The essence of the modernist theory is that Buddhism is a philosophy scientific in nature, condemning all superstitions and beliefs in numerous gods and that Buddhism is not a religion. This is an idea that originated in the Western interpretation of Buddhism (cf. Gombrich 1991a: 73). In fact, the modernists were attracted to and greatly inspired by the nineteenth-century scientific and evolutionist ideology. Gombrich (1991b: 96) quotes the example of a professor of philosophy from a Sri Lankan university who believed that Buddhism was the precursor of some of the ideas of Marx, Freud and Wittgenstein, as well as of some recent scientific discoveries. The modern Buddhists also reject the idea according to which the monastic community is at the centre of all Buddhist communities. They want to reinforce the importance of laity. The best example of this democratization of religious practices is meditation, which has become a widespread lay activity.

Ambedkar: a modernistic Buddhist?

Can Ambedkar be considered a modernist Buddhist? Of course, Ambedkar being a product of his times shares more or less the same positions as Dharmapala, Pandit Iyothee Thass and Lakshmi Narasu. But his identification in terms of a modernistic Buddhist is not as evident as it may seem at first. First, he re-interpreted Buddhism in a non-Buddhist context. He knew Buddhism only through books, that is through different 'borrowed' interpretations. Even though he was in contact with other Buddhists and participated in international Buddhist conferences, Ambedkar had a selective approach, adapting Buddhism with a great deal of liberty. He chose what interested him and left out what he considered inappropriate. This liberty of choice makes for an important difference between him and reformers like Dharmapala who were rooted in a Buddhist milieu.

At the same time Ambedkar shares some common aspects with the modernist Buddhists. His works are largely based on texts of the Theravada tradition, translated into English by Westerners (Moon 1995: 43-6; Sangharakshita 1986a: 146). Towards the end of his life, he began to learn Pali and to prepare the publication of a dictionary (Ambedkar 1998a). But the use of Buddhist texts in their original language has remained rare. The Western influence, which characterises modernist Buddhists, is clearly evident in Ambedkar's borrowing of ideas from rationalism and universal and egalitarian ideology of the Lumières. He had read some Western philosophers' works and was greatly inspired by them. He himself admits owing a lot to John Dewey, the pragmatic American philosopher of his time (Ambedkar 1979b: 79).

Ambedkar's interpretation of the Buddha's life, of *dhamma* and of the *bhikkhusangha* is a rational, radical, and egalitarian interpretation, which questions the ancient Buddhist tradition. The criticism that the Four Noble Truths were not the original thought of the Buddha is one of the prime examples of this. In order to be able to gauge the radicalism of this approach, one must understand that Ambedkar was not unaware of the tradition of the old texts. He had read English translations. However he did not follow the texts totally, instead he reinterpreted them as he thought appropriate. He was fascinated by the figure of the Buddha but he transformed him into a humanist and a kind of social reformer. The

main reason behind his conversion was the supposedly egalitarian message of Buddhism. He took up de-spiritualization and a de-psychologization of Buddhism, while giving little importance to the concepts of transcendence and individual spirituality. He gave it a moral and pragmatic reading and made it into a doctrine of moral and social emancipation. It has already been indicated that his pragmatism and his radicalism had not eliminated all the sacred and spiritual aspects of Buddhism. They have only played a minor role as he considered Buddhism is less of soteriology in sense of spiritual liberation than a social liberation.

As a Buddhist, Ambedkar asked for independence and more autonomy in relation to all Buddhist traditions. On 14 October 1956 he gave the Twenty-two Vows to his 'disciples' and initiated them into Buddhism, acting as an authority comparable to that of the Bhikkhu Chandramani, the monk who had initiated Ambedkar. Despite his lay status, Ambedkar claimed the same legitimacy as an ordained monk. Was this not an exceptional case in Buddhism? Ambedkar faced fierce accusations of having falsified the religion, and of having preached a 'personal' Buddhism without respecting the tradition (cf. Jivaka 1959a and 1959b). Ambedkar thus cannot be identified with modernist Buddhism as his methods go beyond modernism, even transgressing it.

Buddhism: a civic religion

In my opinion, Ambedkar should rather be seen as a man guided by the vision of a better, modern, reformed Indian society, a society that is more just and egalitarian. After all, he developed his idea of a new Buddhism (*navayana*) by interpreting the *dhamma* as a social and sacred phenomenon. It seems as if he sensed a contradiction in the idea of a morality that was rationalist and sacred at the same time. On the one hand, he imagined Buddhism as a secular and civil religion and as the fundament of a free society (Ambedkar 1987c: 442; M. Fuchs 2001). On the other hand; he edited a manual of rituals (1998b), and wrote a Buddhist 'Bible' which ends with a prayer to the Tathagatha[48] (Ambedkar 1992: 599). In fact he repeated several times that the principles of secularism do not mean abandoning religion.

This leads us on to the concept of religion as used by Ambedkar. At first glance, he neither applies a uniform terminology, nor does

he give a pertinent definition. What seems to be the central aspect is the fact that he bases himself primarily on writers like Robertson Smith, C.P. Tiele and Max Müller, all researchers who spread more or less evolutionist ideas according to which each stage of the human civilization is characterized by a specific religion. Ambedkar borrows the idea from them in defining religion as the ideal form of organizing a civil society. He specifies that the function of religion is not to explain the origin of the world, but to reconstruct the world and to make mankind happy. The ideal religion is one that transforms society into a moral, ideal and democratic order, such as Buddhism (Ambedkar 1987c: 442; 1992: 322).

Ambedkar constructs Buddhism in the form of a parallel and an antithesis of a monotheistic religion, without giving up the idea that religion always represents the moral fabric of a society. As he is aware of this conceptual rift, he avoids the term religion wherever he can. The alternative term of *dhamma* corresponds better with his idea of a secularized and anti-traditionalist religion. His Buddhism may be tested, questioned, improved, reformed, in parts even abandoned, as it is not a 'revealed religion' but the object of quest and investigation (Ambedkar 1989: 191; 1992: 221-2). Ambedkar barely envisages an attempt to revive or save Buddhism as a religious tradition, but rather an attempt to reform Indian society in its entirety. Buddhism is an 'a-religious religion', a universal human morale which negates the existence of all religions. Ambedkar renounces Hinduism due to its unequal religious ideology. Rejecting Islam as conservative and fundamentalist, blaming Christianity for having a transcendent god, Ambedkar criticizes Buddhism as it is practised in the traditionally Buddhist countries of South Asia.

NOTES

1. According to Stephen Cohen (1969: 445), the Mahars made up approximately one-sixth of the Bombay Army before 1857.
2. *Hindutva* or 'Hinduness' is a meologism derived from the term 'Hindu' which originally designated all inhabitants of the region beyond the Indus or Sindhu river.
3. The Hindu Nationalist party that broke away from the Congress was founded in 1937. Savarkar was its president from 1937 to 1942. Initially the party was well represented in Maharashtra, but was reduced to a marginal party in the 1945-6 elections.

4. In 1890, Dharmapala discovered a manuscript in a temple that dates back to the eighteenth century. It provided details on the right method to practise meditation. He was thus the first modern Buddhist to have learnt meditation from texts and not from a teacher. He considered it as an important lay practice (Bechert 1966-73, I: 49-50).
5. Ambavadekar indicates the name of his ancestral village, Ambavade, which is in present-day Ratnagiri district.
6. Mhow, in Indore district, Madhya Pradesh was originally a British military camp, as indicated by the name MHOW—Military Headquarters of War (K.N. Kadam 1991: 67).
7. The doctoral thesis, entitled 'The National Dividend of India: A Historical and Analytical Study' was published as *The Evaluation of Provincial Finance in British India* in 1925. In 1989, it was re-edited by the Maharashtra government (*BAWS*, vol. 6: 5-312).
8. Gandhi coined this term, which literally means 'Force of Truth' and refers to the technique of non-violent resistance.
9. Cf. the articles by Gandhi in his periodical *Young India*, re-edited in 1981 by the Navajivan Trust at Ahmedabad: 'The Sin of Untouchability' dated 19 January 1921 (vol. 3: 21), 'Varnashram and Untouchability', 13 August 1925 (vol. 7: 282-3), 'The Crime of Caste', 14 January 1926 (vol. 8: 16), 'Untouchability and Unreason', 28 April 1927 (vol. 9: 134), and 'Our Shame', 30 June 1927 (vol. 9: 212).
10. This book resulted from an invitation to Ambedkar from the Jat-Pat-Todak-Mandal at Lahore, the 'anti-caste' branch of the Arya Samaj. This association that organized inter-caste meals and marriages proclaimed that the Aryan fraternity would cross all social and religious boundaries. Ambedkar was to preside over the annual conference in 1936 and to give a speech. But the invitation led to controversy. After having read the first version of Ambedkar's text, the organizers found his position too critical and asked him to remove certain passages. According to them, Ambedkar was too critical of the Vedas and the Hindu scriptures. Ambedkar refused, and withdrew from the conference. A little later he published the same text in the form of a book (cf. Graham 1994).
11. The so-called 'collaboration' between Ambedkar and the British is a controversial and widely-debated topic (Jaffrelot 2000: 146-8; cf. also the discussion on the polemical book by Arun Shourie).
12. Extracts of the Marathi text were edited by Khairamode (*Caritra*, VII: 87-9) and by the Buddha Dhamma Education Society of India (1992). D.C. Ahir (1997: 15-20), Grover (1993: 3-13) and Zelliot (1977: 122-3) have translated extracts into English. Bhagwan Das (1963-80, IV: 11-72) translated the complete text from Marathi as it was published in the *Janata* (23 May 1936).
13. According to Zelliot (1978: 108), the Marathi term *manuski* is to be translated as 'humanitarian attitude', 'humanity', 'self-respect',

'manhood'. The literal meaning being 'of man' it is one of the key concepts of contemporary Buddhist and Dalit discourse.

14. The Marathi expression quoted by Khairamode (*Caritra*, VI: 87) is *dharamantarakara*.
15. According to Khairamode (*Caritra*,VI: 87), 'if you want to create an organization (*sanghatana*), change your religion' would be a better translation.
16. *Samata* is another crucial concept of the Buddhist and Dalit discourse.
17. *Svatantrata* (independence, liberty) is an integral part of the contemporary Buddhist and Dalit discourse.
18. According to Khairamode (*Caritra*, VI: 87), 'if you want to live happily (*samsara sukhaca*), change your religion' would be a better translation.
19. Rajagriha near Patna, was the ancient capital of Magadha. Legend has it that the Buddha spent a few monsoons here and that the first Buddhist Council was held here in 400 BC.
20. The venerable Chandramani (1876-1972) received supreme Buddhist ordainment (*upasampada*) in 1903 in Burma. In India he was associated with the activities of Dharmapala and of the MBSI and was mainly involved in the reinstatement of the Kushinagar shrine as a Buddhist holy place (cf. Ahir 1989a: 46-9).
21. Cf. *Dr Ambedkar: The Principal Architect of the Constitution of India* published in 1994 by the Maharashtra Government (*BAWS*, vol. 13).
22. Badr-ud-din Tyabji, who incidentally was a Muslim, seems to have suggested the *dharmacakra* and Ashokan capital as national emblems. For further details see his autobiography, *Memoirs of an Egoist* by Badr-ud-din Tyabji, vol. 1, *1907–1956*, Roli Books, Delhi, 1988, pp. 172-3.
23. In an interview, Savita Ambedkar, confirmed to me that Ambedkar had already converted in May 1951 in the Birla Buddhist temple at Delhi before leaving for the World Buddhist Conference in Ceylon. Perhaps this was a secret conversion.
24. According to the chronology used by the Theravada Buddhists, the Buddha's *nirvana* occurred in 544/543 BC. It is interesting that the ecumenical Buddhist movement adopted this chronology despite the fact that it is considered inaccurate by experts.
25. The tenth day of *navaratri* marks the end of the rainy season and celebrates Durga's victory over Mahishasura as well as Rama's victory over Ravana (Singh 1994: 61; Viswanathan 1996: 267; Fuller 1992: 120-1; Michaels 1998: 341).
26. The 'one who is destined to be illuminated', a person who temporarily renounces his deliverance to enable others to attain enlightenment.
27. Apocalyptical, teleological, and messianical terms are not alien to Buddhism. Cf. the article by Deeg (1999) on the myth of Maitreya (the well-wisher), the Buddha of the future.

28. The Pali text of the *Trisarana* goes as follows: *Buddham saranam gacchami* (I take refuge in the Buddha), *dhammam saranam gacchami* (I take refuge in the *dhamma*), *sangham saranam gacchami* (I take refuge in the *sangha*). This is repeated a second and third time.
29. The Pali text of the Pancashila says: *Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I vow to observe the precept of abstaining from harming living beings), *adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I vow to observe the precept of not taking what is not given), *kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I vow to observe the precept of abstaining from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures), *musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I vow to observe the precept of abstaining from false speech), *surameraya majjapamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I vow to observe the precept of abstaining from unmindful states due to alcoholic drinks or drugs).
30. The Marathi text is published in several Buddhist ritual manuals (Patil 1991: 16-17; The Buddha Dhamma Education Society 1992; The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 18-19; Sadananda 1979). Kausalyayan (1994: 39) and Sanghasen Singh (1990: 233-4) translated it into Hindi. The English translations were published by D.L. Ramteke (1983: 192-3), by Eleanor Zelliot (1992a: 215) and by Heinz Bechert (1966-73, III: 419-20).
31. The Noble Eightfold Path (Pali *ariya-atthangika-magga*) leads to the end of 'suffering' (*dukkha*). The 8 divisions are right comprehension (*samma ditthi*), right thought (*samma sankhappa*), right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*samma kammanta*), right means of existence (*samma ajiva*), right effort (*samma vayama*), right attention (*samma sati*) and the right concentration (*samma samadhi*).
32. The Ten Moral Virtues (Skr. *paramita*) are: generosity (*dana*), morality (*shila*), patience (*kshanti*), bravery (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*), wisdom (*prajna*), skill (*upaya*), concentration (*pranidhana*), strength (*bala*) and knowledge (*jnana*).
33. Different terms are used in the various editions of the text. Pagare (1983: 100), The Buddhist Society of India (1993: 11), Sadananda (1979) and Sanghasen Singh (1990: 40) use *jnana*. Dinabandhu (1993: 25), Kausalyayan (1994b: 40) and the Buddha Dhamma Education Society (1992) use *prajna*. Bechert (1966-73, III: 419) uses the Pali term *panna*.
34. Literally the term *saddharma* should be translated as the 'best' *dharma*. Zelliot (1992a: 215) proposes the following version: 'This is my firm belief that the Bauddha *Dhamma* is the best religion.'
35. Ambedkar quotes a typical argument of his times. In 1907 Narasu (1993: 1) had already explained why Buddhism, Islam and Christianity could not be compared, as the Buddha was a human being, not a super human.
36. The *Tipitaka* (The Three Baskets) designates the Pali triple canon divided into *Vinayapitaka* (Disciplinary code), *Suttapitaka* (Philosophy) and

Abhidhammapitaka (Superior Doctrine). In his works, Ambedkar extensively used the translations by I.B. Horner, T.W. Rhys Davids and F.L. Woodward published by the Pali Text Society.

37. The first great poetical work on the life of the Buddha is attributed to Ashvagosha, who lived in the first or second century AD. Ambedkar probably used the Hindi version by Suryanarayan Chaudhari (cf. Moon 1995: 43).
38. The renowned indologist Dieter Schlinghoff also refuses to accept that the Buddha renounces the world after repeated discovery of human suffering as the Buddha was not 'weak minded' (Schlinghoff, 'Die Meditation unter dem Jambu-Baum', in *WZKS* (*O*), 31, 1987: 111-30)
39. Ambedkar refers to Kosambi who had already spoken of this conflict in the 1930s and the 1940s (cf. Moon 1995: ix-xi). Schumann (1982: 17) confirms that the different clans living in the same region fought amongst themselves regularly on the issue of river waters and pastures. According to him, their relations were generally peaceful; several marriages were performed between the Shakyas and the Koliyas.
40. This takes up the more general hermeneutic question of the historical content of religious biographies. Peter Harvey (1990: 15) and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (1990: 25-34) point out rightly that old biographies of the Buddha are not objective in nature. They give more information of the intentions of the authors and what the Buddha's life means to them, than on the historical figure *per se* (cf. the discussion on the hagiographies of Dr Ambedkar in Chapter 3.
41. The Buddha explains that neither a *vasala* (canaille) nor a brahman can bear this title by virtue of his birth. One can become a *vasala* or a brahmana through one's *kamma*: *na jacca vasalo hoti, na jacca hoti brahmana, kammana vasalo hoti, kammana hoti brahmana* (*Snip* 24: 13-15).
42. See for example the *Ambatthasutta* (*Digh-Nik.* I: 87-110), the *Sonadandasutta* (*Digh-Nik.* I: 111-26), the *Tevijjasutta* (*Digh-Nik.* I: 235-53), the *Aggannasuttanta* (*Digh-Nik.* III: 80-98), the *Madhurasutta* (*Majjh-Nik:* II, 83-90), the *Kannakatthalasutta* (*Majjh-Nik.* II: 125-38), the *Arahanta Vagga* of the *Brahmanasamyutta* (*Samy-Nik.* I: 165-70), the *Vasalasutta* (*Snip* 21-254), the *Brahmanadhammikasutta* (*Snip* 50-5). The same arguments also appear in the Jatakas like the *Shilavimamsajataka* (*Jat.* III: 193-5), the *Ambajataka* (*Jat.* IV: 200-7), the *Uddalakajataka* (*Jat.* IV: 297-304), the *Bhuridattajataka* (*Jat.* VI: 157-219).
43. The 'conditioned production' (Pali *pattica-samuppada*, Sanskrit *pratitya-samutpada*) is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhist philosophy. It is based on conditionality, relativity, inter-dependence, continuity of life and its cessation. For the detailed formula refer to Harvey (1990: 54-60), Klimkeit (1990: 230) and Kalupahana (1994: 53-9).

44. The idea according to which the concept of *dukkha* would have a pessimistic connotation provoked vehement criticism from various Buddhist experts. Dharmapala (1926: 117) was already against all nihilist interpretations of Buddhism. More recently, Rahula (1978: 36) confirmed that the vision of life and that of the world as promoted by Buddhism are neither pessimistic nor optimistic but 'absolutely realistic'.
45. Cf. the *Culakammavibhangasutta* (*Majjh-Nik.* III: 202-6) where the Buddha explains how *kamma* determines rebirth in the heavens or in hell.
46. The five aggregates (Pali *khanda*; Sanskrit *skanda*) that make up the individual are *rupa* (shape), *vedana* (sensation), *samjna* (perception), *samskara* (conditioned states, forms) and *vijnana* (conscience).
47. Ambedkar had first chosen non-violence in Buddhism as the topic for his presentation. But the organizers requested him to speak on communism, a theme that seemed more current to them.
48. The term *Tathagatha* (the one who thus came) is a title generally employed in Sanskrit and Pali texts to refer to the Buddha.

3. The Buddhist Movement in Contemporary Maharashtra: Politics, Conflicts and Interactions

Before analysing the Buddhist discourse in more detail, one must look into the socio-political context of contemporary Maharashtra. This chapter is not a summary of all that has already been written about this state. Some good research has been done on the politics (Sirsikar 1995), society (Omvedt 1976), history (B. Gokhale 1976b; S.M. Rao 1968; Sunthankar 1988 and 1993), religion (Berntsen and Zelliot 1992; Sontheimer 1995), philosophy (Lederle 1976) and literature (Poitevin 1987; Sontheimer 1974; Tulpule 1979). Studies on the Dalit movement by J. Gokhale (1993), Omvedt (1994a) and Zelliot (1992a) will not be summarized here, but certain facts and parameters which are particularly interesting, need to be presented. The local caste configuration and the relations that the Buddhists have with the other communities are of special importance. It is through their interactions and exchanges with other communities that the Buddhists share their vision of the world and claim recognition for themselves on an equal level. These data were collected during my numerous stays in Maharashtra between 1994 and 1999 and refer to the situation of that particular time. Though these data would need certain updates, they still significantly illustrate the complexity and the contradictions that characterize the Buddhist movement in Maharashtra.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PARAMETERS

My study was carried out in western Maharashtra, situated between the Konkan coast and the interior, a region equipped with a good infrastructure. It represents the economic and cultural core of

Maharashtra. Urbanization and economic development have made it one of the most highly developed regions in the country. This region is divided into ten districts: Nashik, Nandurbar, Dhule, Jalgaon, Ahmadnagar, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Solapur and Kolhapur. This is an agricultural belt (wheat, various fruit trees, sugarcane and vineyards), and at the same time highly industrialized. Approximately one-third of the country's industrial production and 13 per cent of the foreign investment lies in this region (Bhandare and Mukhopadhyaya 1997: 150; Bhandare and Aiyar 1999: 87).

This economic strength presents a contrast to the growing poverty: according to recent statistics, around 30 million people, i.e. more than one-third of the total population, lives below the poverty line (Bhandare and Aiyar 1999: 212). In fact, the gap between the elite in the large metropolitan cities and those who live in the countryside is progressively widening. The literacy rate is an example of social inequality. According to the 1991 census, it is 64.9 per cent while the average for India is only 52.2 per cent. However, if we study the urban regions, the figures are more striking. In cities like Pune (81), Mumbai (82.4), Nagpur (81.9) Solapur (68.3) and Aurangabad (76.8 per cent respectively), a large part of the population can read and write (Bhandare and Aiyar 1999: 53-5). However, in the villages, the number drops to 50 per cent. The situation is worse if we study it gender-wise: in the district of Pune, 59.7 per cent of the women are literate, as against 81.5 per cent of the men (Banthia 1995: 39). Now and again the government launches a campaign against this malady, but unfortunately the projects are difficult to materialize.

Mumbai and Pune, areas of my study, are the most economically developed and urbanized regions in the country. Officially the population of Mumbai is around twelve million inhabitants, Mumbai being the largest city in the country. Mumbai also has the highest productivity in the country (Sirsikar 1995: 67-9). All the industries like pharmaceuticals, chemicals, metallurgy, textiles and food products are present. This has an impact on the job market. Mumbai has the largest number of employees in Maharashtra.

Apart from the colonies constructed by the government for civil servants, other Buddhist areas are the settlements of Ghatkopar, Dharavi, and Chembur. These locations are inhabited by different castes of untouchables as well as by communities coming from other

regions in India. Indeed, Mumbai is not merely a Maharashtrian city; half of the inhabitants are immigrants from the rest of the country (Sirsikar 1995: 56). This fact gives rise to violent conflicts, as the Shiv Sena tries to conquer the city and subjugate it under the saffron flag, in order to claim its Hindu/Maharashtrian identity.

Pune, often called the 'Queen of the Deccan' is the second important centre I chose for my research. This is an old intellectual and cultural town of Maharashtra. The Peshwas had chosen this city as the capital of their kingdom. Under their reign, Pune was the centre of the brahmanic orthodoxy, under the British it became a centre for education and scientific research. This is still an important city because of the large number of colleges, universities and institutions. It is one of the centres for the publication of Marathi books. But Pune offers more than that. During the 1960s, the district of Pune became highly industrialized. Located close to the metropolitan city of Mumbai, it houses some big companies, Indian as well as multinational.

The actual population of Pune is about 2.5 million (Bhandare and Aiyar 1995: 55). The city is made up of several residential areas, which can be recognized by their specific inmates. It must be noted that modern urbanization has not altered the traditions significantly in the various residential areas. Certainly there are upcoming new areas, which house people of different castes and regions. There are Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, who live side by side. But at the same time, there are certain areas that house only the people of a specific community. The heart of the old town, Sadashiv Peth, remains an area almost exclusively inhabited by brahmans. Christians and Muslims live mainly in the cantonment area, the old military base of the British. There are several Buddhist colonies, the majority being ancient *maharavadas*.[1] Yeravda, Dapodi, and Bopodi are suburbs with sizeable Buddhist populations. One important Buddhist colony is in the south of the city, near the Parvati hills, and another is in Cantonment, where the Mahars lived during the colonial rule to serve the British military. Others live in areas of mixed inhabitation and in various settlements of Pune.

Socio-political configuration of castes

Omvedt (1994a: 60) divides the Maharashtrian population into three main groups: brahmans, non-brahmans, and untouchables.[2] In terms of social stratification, Vora and Palshikar (1994) identify the

brahmans and the Marathas as the dominant classes, whereas the untouchables and the tribal people are the exploited classes. The problems of applying the Marxist model of social classes to the Indian society having already been outlined; the interactions amongst the brahmans, the Marathas and the Mahars cannot be reduced to a fight amongst social classes.

Even if Omvedt's grouping does not cover the entire population of contemporary Maharashtra, it is an indicator of different political trends and the mutual exchanges that take place. Brahmans have enjoyed a monopoly in the fields of education, administration, and politics for centuries. The arrival of colonial rule, following the downfall of the Peshwas in 1818, did not dislodge their elitist position (Sirsikar 1995: 60; Sunthankar 1988: 125-7). In fact, the British favoured the brahmans while recruiting in fields like administration, the army, education and politics. As of today they represent approximately 4 per cent of the population in Maharashtra (Dahiwale 1995: 336), and are still part of a dominant elite in the media, the arts and education. This dominating position has been challenged by different castes over time.

In the agro-economic context where land ownership plays a crucial role, the Marathas, who were the main landlords, are considered the dominant caste (Dumont 1992: 204-8; Srinivas 1995a: 10). Indeed, at least since the time of Shivaji (1630-80), they have claimed kshatriya status to symbolize their position. The most articulate form of this conflict is the non-brahman movement, which emerged during the nineteenth century amongst the Marathas. Today the Marathas represent about 30-40 per cent of the total population in Maharashtra, and exercise significant influence in politics and economics (Sirsikar 1995: 60. Dahiwale 1995: 336). They control most of the agricultural cooperatives. The sugar industry is mainly in the hands of the so called 'Sugar Barons' of Maratha origin.

The other caste which questions the brahmans' authority, is the Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu (CKP), a caste of scribes comparable to the Kayasthas in north India. In Maharashtra their social standing is contested. Owing to their important position in the administration, they claimed a status equal to that of the brahmans, and this has led to many conflicts. The brahmans considered them shudras; the Peshwas prohibited them from performing certain rituals that were meant only for the 'upper' castes (Omvedt 1976: 67).

The untouchables always formed a major part of Maharasthrian society. The Mahars, Chambhars,[3] and Matangs[4] are the most important among these castes. As inter-caste relations are analysed in detail in the third part of this chapter, we shall not discuss them here. The tribal population, at the bottom of the social ladder, makes up about 9 per cent of the total population (Bhandare and Mukhopadhyay 1997: 49). In the Thane, Nasik, Amaravati and Dhule districts, these tribes continue to live away from the cities, often in conditions that are worse than miserable. Poverty, epidemics and hunger are part of their fate. Often they are victims of forced migration, not only within Maharashtra, but also to other states. Their land and houses are taken away for ambitious projects such as the construction of barrages, mines, and factories.

This brief sketch is incomplete without adding the religious minorities (Muslims and Christians), the Gujarati traders and the immigrant population from the other Indian states. However, the aim here is not to give an elaborate list of the actual population of Maharashtra, but an idea of the people, the movements and the culture. The Mahar movement must be studied in light of its relations with other socio-political factors. Only a contextual study will allow a better understanding of the development of the movement as well as the contradictions, the dynamics, and the conflicts that arise from it.

Quotas for castes: competition and controversies

With Independence, the Government of India revived a system of positive discrimination for the untouchables, listed as Scheduled Castes (SC).[5] This positive discrimination has two aspects: on the one hand the SC are guaranteed representation in the legislative assembly, which is proportional to the numbers in each state. On the other hand, they are assigned employment quotas in the administration, in the education system, and in the civil services. The quotas were designed as a temporary regulation and there is no fixed definition which decides which community belongs to this group; only the President of India can decide to allot these quotas to a certain caste (Banthia 1995: 31). On the national level, these castes represent approximately 16.5 per cent of the total population, i.e. 138 million Indians (Bhandare and Mukhopadhyay 1997: 49). The

quota system is not confined to the SC; it also includes the tribal populations (ST, Scheduled Tribes) and the Other Backward Classes (OBC). In 1990, when the V.P. Singh government declared a 27 per cent quota for the OBC, in keeping with the recommendation of the Mandal Commission, there were violent riots in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. In order to understand the repercussions of this conflict we should bear in mind that these quotas can extend to half of the total positions available. The opponents of this system believe that these quotas are a hindrance to competition and to the efficient functioning of public services, because the administrative and teaching posts are given to people who are not sufficiently qualified. The controversial character of this debate becomes clearer on understanding that reservations in the Indian Administrative Service apply mainly to insignificant posts, not the prestigious ones. The quotas for the ST and SC are not respected and the representation of the OBC is not proportional to their actual numbers in the demographic structure (Herrenschmidt 1996a: 409; Omvedt 1994a: 332; Patil 1994: 277-8; Dahiwale 1995: 339). This explains the Dalit outcry that the system is ineffective, and the desire for an increased quota. Some ask for this system to be implemented in the private sector also.[6] As for political representations, Kanshi Ram (1982) constantly claims that reserving a certain number of seats for SC/ ST candidates does not change the fact that the upper classes are still dominant. Instead of being able to represent themselves in an independent manner, they are elected by a majority that is not untouchable.

The quotas are not only a subject of debate amongst the upper castes and the Dalits. The limited number of posts available provokes a certain kind of competition and a 'race' for the quotas. The system as provided in the Constitution, was designed as a temporary measure and the SC category was meant only for the Hindus. Untouchability being defined as a Hindu custom, Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians of hitherto untouchable castes were not originally a part of this category, and all untouchables who converted to a non-Hindu caste lost this privilege.[7] But this rigid rule did not last for long. In 1956 quotas were allotted to Sikh untouchables. The government of Maharashtra recognized the Buddhists as Backward Classes immediately after their conversion (Galanter 1992: 125). But this did not satisfy the Buddhists, who said that their marginalization was not removed with their conversion and they still needed some

form of protection. This was widely criticized by the leaders of non-Buddhist untouchable castes, such as Jagjivan Ram and Rajbhoj. In 1960, with reference to Maharashtra, the Buddhists were thus given an equal recognition as the other SC (Zelliot 1992a: 124n). In the national context, the Buddhist 'ex-untouchables' were only included in this category in the year 1990 and this too, under pressure from Ram Vilas Paswan.[8]

In the case of Maharashtra, fifty-nine castes are listed as SC, i.e. about 9 million people (Banthia 1995: 31-3). Unfortunately it is impossible to give the exact figure of the Mahar population because the current census does not make a distinction based on caste. That is why we have to refer to the 1961 census, in which the Mahars represented 35 per cent, the Matangs about 32.5 per cent and the Chambhars 22 per cent of the SCs. However, this census, the first since the conversion movement in 1956, did not include the Mahars who had converted to Buddhism. The Mahars, who did not want to give up their quotas and the privileges given to the SC, were hesitant to register themselves as Buddhists. Despite the fact that the quota system was extended to the Buddhists in 1960, the number of Buddhists still enlisted as 'Mahar Hindus' is certainly an important figure. We can thus estimate that the Buddhists and Mahars combined together made up about half the population classified as SC (Danda and Samanta 1993: 280, 293; Patwardhan 1973: 9). In all, the Buddhists represented a group that was quantitatively important. It is thesefore not surprising that other SC came to resent the Buddhists as a dominant caste. In fact, I wonder whether these quotas actually promote social equality (Radhakrishnan 1997; Sivaramayya 1997; Béteille 1997b). On the contrary the promotions based on a particular caste identity seem to reinforce the institution of the corporate spirit. The example of the Buddhists who had to claim their Mahar origins is significant, thus protecting the separatist nature of caste. However, debates on the details and the reforms of the system are not easy, since the quota system is now a political issue.

Contemporary politics

In order to understand the context in which the contemporary Buddhist movement is situated, we must study the rise of the Shiv Sena, a powerful Hindu nationalist organization. Its rise to power in the 1990s signifies an important change because since its creation, the Congress party always governed Maharashtra. This situation

changed in 1995 with the victory of the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance. Even though many people had predicted a loss, the alliance also won the 1997 municipal elections. But during the 1999 October elections, the Congress(I) was, again, the most powerful party. With the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the rebel group headed by Sharad Pawar, a new government was formed.[9]

The Shiv Sena was founded in 1966 in Bombay by Bal Thackeray, once a caricaturist and editor, belonging to the CKP caste. His aim was to 'defend' Mumbai against the invasion of immigrants from south India, the Gujaratis and the Muslims. During the 1970s, the Shiv Sena progressively established its 'saffron' identity, following the nationalist Hindu agenda. In 1984, forming an alliance with the BJP, the transition to the Hindutva ideology was complete (Lele 1995a: 1525).

Shivaji plays a fundamental role in establishing the identity and ideology of this party. He is the symbolic hero of the Shiv Sena, incarnating all the values of military patriotism that form the basis of the nationalist Hindu doctrine. He is revered as the patriotic model who has established *Maharashtra Dharma*, and fought against the 'Muslims' in Delhi.[10] The crusade to rename the international airport in Mumbai after Shivaji is but an example.[11] Thackeray constantly proclaims that Shivaji's regime represents the golden period of Maharashtra, a time when economic prosperity and social justice were supreme. According to Manohar Joshi, the former chief minister, one must return to the days of Shivaji 'when justice was meant for all, and it was free from corruption'.[12]

The most violent nationalist outburst in which the Shiv Sena was involved, took place in Mumbai between December 1992 and January 1993. It was the direct result of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.[13] During these riots, more than 600 people lost their lives. Buildings, shops and taxis were set on fire. The Shiv Sena played a decisive role since Thackeray was continually inciting the Shiv Sainiks to teach the Muslims a lesson. Thackeray was summoned several times before the courts; the Shrikrishna Commission accused him of violence against the Muslim community, but the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance protected him and challenged the credibility of the commission.[14] In 1998, the commission's report was rejected with vehemence, as being pro-Muslim.[15] Bal Thackeray still creates shock waves with his pro-fascist and anti-Muslim 'lapses', his verbal attacks and due to his love for scandal (Beltz and Saglio 1996). As a 'patriot'

he extols the extinction of Maharashtra's enemies—'the corrupt politicians of the Congress', the communists and the Buddhists, and the expulsion of immigrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan. He propagates a purification crusade against all 'anti-national elements', and calls for their collective denunciation. New campaigns such as the Saffron March of 1998 were characterized by the same nationalist radicalism.[16] Thackeray raises his voice against the 'controversial' idea of a secular India. Those who do not agree must leave the country, as the Shiv Sena will hoist the saffron flag everywhere in India, as a symbol of sacrifice and protest. Hindustan should be a place where Hindus can live with self-respect.

THE POST-AMBEDKARITE BUDDHIST MOVEMENT

Let us go back to 14 and 15 October 1956, when millions of Mahars followed the example of their leader and converted to Buddhism in collective rituals (Ramteke 1983: 282-6). The Chambhar groups converted in north India, in places like Delhi, Agra, Meerut, Jalandhar (Lynch 1969; Singh 1986; Shastri 1959: 66-7). These mass conversions have grown tremendously according to the last census (Tables 1 and 2).

Between 1951 and 1961 the Buddhist population of Maharashtra went up from 0.01 to 7 per cent of the total population. According to the 1991 census, there are around five million Buddhists. They form the majority of the six million Buddhists living in Bengal, Tripura, Sikkim, Mizoram, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh

TABLE 1: RATE OF GROWTH OF BUDDHISTS IN INDIA

Year	Population (total)	Buddhists	Percentage of the total population
1951	361 088 090	189 577	0.05
1961	439 234 771	3 250 227	0.74
1971	548 200 000	3 900 000	0.7
1981	659 300 460	4 650 194	0.7
1991	816 169 666	6 323 492	0.77

Source: Patwardhan 1973; Bhandare and Mukhopadhyay 1997; Vijayanunni 1995.

TABLE 2: RATE OF GROWTH OF THE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY IN MAHARASHTRA

Year	Population (total)	Buddhists	Percentage of the total population
1951	32 002 564	2 487	0.01
1961	39 553 781	2 789 501	7.05
1971	50 412 235	3 264 223	6.47
1981	62 783 000	3 946 149	6.39
1991	78 937 000	5 040 785	6.28

Source: Patwardhan 1973; Mahana 1985; Vijayanunni 1995.

today, in addition to the Tibetans exiles in India (Vijayanunni 1995: xiv; Kantowsky 1999: 4; Zelliot 1984: 94-5). The end of the sharp rise in the number of Buddhists shows that the conversion movement came to an end, and that other castes and communities did not convert. This suggests that apart from a few exceptions, most Mahars considered themselves Buddhists (*bauddha*). Yet it is impossible to say exactly how many Mahars remained Hindus because the official census does not refer to the castes when it refers to the religious background.

How can consequences of conversion to Buddhism be evaluated? The aim of my study is to understand the new ideas that the Buddhists have about themselves. But apart from the 'mental' changes, which are mainly about representation, what can be said about the socio-economic conditions of the Buddhists? It is difficult to give general information. We must first differentiate between the situation in the cities and the villages. There are a large number of Buddhists in Pune and in Mumbai today, who live quite comfortably. Some also work in government offices, live in cosmopolitan residential areas, and go to the same restaurants and shops as their neighbours who belong to the upper castes (Kamble 1999). But these privileges are not common to all. Most of the Buddhists occupy low-paid jobs, they are unemployed, and excluded from society—and this applies as well to their non-Buddhist friends. It is the result of modernization and liberalization in Indian society as a whole.

In the villages, the situation is worse, as we also have to take into account the different regions. Danda and Samanta (1993: 272) have

studied a village in eastern Maharashtra where the Buddhists, originally Mahars, now enjoy more economic power than the other untouchables. N. Kundu (1993: 324-5) has studied a village in the west of Maharashtra where most Buddhists were employed as farm workers, ill paid, and as poor as before. In a more general manner, Bopagamage (1979: 1) concludes that in spite of their attempts to break free, Buddhists are still considered an inferior caste and suffer from deprivation.

Social segmentation: caste and subcastes

The former Mahars were divided into several subcastes (*potajati*). K.S. Singh (1993: 835) enumerates about 50; Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 6-19) lists the Somavamshis, the Andhavanas and the Bhatas as the most famous ones specifying that the Mahars only enumerate a limited number of five different subcastes. In fact, nowadays subcastes play a less important role in matrimonial relations than they did earlier. A few decades ago it was rare, almost impossible, to organize the wedding of a Mahar couple of different subcaste. Daya Pawar (1996: 193-4) writes in his autobiography: 'There were rarely any weddings between Mahars from the Konkan and Mahars from Desh. . . . The Buddhists only celebrated weddings among the same subcaste.' And Vasant Moon (2001: 6), editor of Ambedkar's works, adds that before he was born, 'subcastes didn't eat in each other's houses' and that 'they sat in separate rows' at public gatherings. He affirms that

> [i]f by mistake anyone sat down in the wrong place, the subcaste *panchayat* would do a purification ceremony. The entire neighbourhood would have to be washed with the water from the well near the temple. Later, when the taps came, the Barke women would not put their hands on the taps of the Bavane women. Everyone had a fierce pride in his subcaste. (Moon 2001:6)

In an interview Meenakshi Moon, wife of Vasant Moon and herself, a Buddhist activist and writer, confirms: .

> Before converting to Buddhism, there were $12^1/_2$ subcastes (*potajati*) in the Mahar community (*samaja*). My father belonged to the Bavane sub-caste. Before converting, there were never any weddings amongst the $12^1/_2$ subcastes. If such a marriage took place, the couple would have been ostracised from the caste. After such a conversion, Doctor Ambedkar

recommended inter-caste marriages (*antarjatiya vivaha*). There is no place for casteism (*jatapata*) in Buddhism. I was married on May 4, 1958. My husband belonged to the subcaste called Ladavana, and I belonged to the subcaste called Bavane. After conversion, inter-caste marriages became common. Ours was an inter-caste marriage but I never felt that we had belonged to different subcastes. All my children, four daughters and one son, are married. I only made sure that their partners were Buddhists.

It is interesting to note that Meenakshi Moon calls her marriage an inter-caste one, though actually it was a marriage between two different subcastes. This shows the importance of subdivisions in the Mahar community in the earlier days. It also shows that these marriage restrictions have now disappeared. However, the interview proves that the absence of subcastes does not necessarily signify that marriages are exogamous. Moon says that Buddhism is egalitarian in its approach and opposed to the caste system, yet insists that her children marry only Buddhists. Is this not a contradiction? What about the argument that Buddhism does not recognize caste? Activists are always asking the Buddhists, and insisting that they should have inter-caste marriages to get rid of the caste logic. Waghmare (1995: 199-200) accuses all those who do not honour this request, of still remaining in the Hindu spirit. Another Buddhist woman explains to me in an interview: 'I believe in inter-caste marriages. Caste should not be a barrier in weddings. The caste system in India is a shameful thing for society and humanity. Marriages within the same caste do not bring the different castes closer but only widen the gap. If we want to get rid of the caste system we should encourage inter-caste marriages.' This is not true of the social reality where marriages are still organized among Mahar Buddhists. According to Bénéï (1996) and K.S. Singh (1993: 835), the most preferred match is—as with most Maharashtrians—that of a boy with the daughter of his maternal uncle (*mamachi mulgi*). Most striking are the matrimonial advertisements in the Indian dailies where it is sometimes written that a 'Buddhist partner (Mahar) is wanted'.

However, there are more and more inter-caste marriages. It is well known that Ambedkar had himself married Savita Kabir, a Saraswat brahman, as his second wife on 15 April 1948. But many of his followers immediately criticized this decision and Savita Kabir still has a stigma attached to her name today. Others consider this act Ambedkar's victory over the Saraswat brahmans' orthodoxy, and urge all Buddhists to follow his example (Guru 1997b: 26-7).

In fact, one thing seems particularly interesting to me: in the inter-castes marriages that I have known, the husband is generally a Buddhist and the wife is from an upper caste, a brahman or a Maratha.[17] This practice is despised as *pratiloma* (an unconventional way of doing things) according to the varna theory as developed by *Manusmriti*. But there are also cases where a Buddhist woman has married an upper caste man: for example, in Nagpur, the famous Dalit writer Kumud Pawde has married a Maratha. It must be noted that these inter-caste marriages take place only in urban settings. It is in this environment that the future partners enjoy some freedom and dare to marry out of their castes, without seeking their parent's opinion. This custom is not specific to the Buddhist community, it is quite common in India, and a part of all the castes and communities. The criticism of the caste system in India in favour of inter-caste marriages is politically correct. But in the context of daily living, matrimonial choices follow their own social reasoning.

The Dalit movement

The Dalit movement emerging after Ambedkar's death, is the most radical expression of social emancipation amongst the Mahars. It must be noted that the Dalit movement today surpasses the Mahar community, even though most of the activists in question are of Mahar origin, they consider themselves as Buddhist as well as Dalit.[18] In other words, the collective emancipation of the Mahars, the Dalit movement and the conversion to Buddhism are distinct and yet inseparable. Let us recapitulate some historic facts.

According to Arjun Dangle (1992b: 241-2), Mahar, Buddhist and important politician from the RPI, born in 1945, it was during the first conference of Dalit writers in Mumbai in 1958 that the idea of Dalit literature was born. This conference was organized by the Dalit Sahitya Sangha but the notion of Dalit literature remained unknown to many. More than ten years later, in 1969, the journal *Marathwada* published a special feature on this movement and it was then that Dalit literature (*dalit sahitya)* was established as a genre. Young writers like Daya Pawar, Shankarao Kharat, Keshav Meshram, Yeshwant Manohar, Hira Bansode, Kumud Pawde and Namdeo Dhasal (all of Mahar origin) protested against oppression by the superior castes in their writings. Many literary reviews, of which some have survived, were the main medium for this new

literature. The Milind College[19] at Aurangabad became the centre of the movement and the Milind Sahitya Parishad was formed. In 1967, the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sangha met in Mumbai. Gangadhar Pantawane (Dangle 1992b; Gayakavada 1998) edited the magazine *Asmitadarsha* (Mirror of one's own conscience).

Dalit literature is more a social protest than a search for new aesthetics. It is a 'rebellious writing' to awaken the social conscience. In the beginning it was in the form of poems. Then, many autobiographies were published: The older untouchables describe their sufferings and tell about their life in the villages. They also commemorate the development and success of the movement, as well as their conversion to Buddhism. The autobiography serves to preserve the cultural memory of the Mahar community. It calls upon people to keep Babasaheb in their hearts and to follow him in order to be successful. It is not only a collective commemorative act, but also addresses the entire Indian society. The Dalit literature campaigns for the untouchables and their fight for an equal recognition, as also for a more just and democratic society. Many intellectuals in Maharashtra were shocked by a vocabulary that threatened and insulted the good traditional taste. The critics condemned it for its vulgar language, its new subject matter—that of untouchability—and lack of artistic quality. Today, Dalit literature is officially recognized as an integral part of contemporary Marathi literature. Shankarao Kharat presided over the Akhila Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelan from 1984 to 1985. In October 1998, Gangadhar Pantawane was elected President.

I have already said that the Dalit movement is not a literary movement only. It were the Dalit Panthers who best expressed their political agenda. In 1972, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar (all Mahars) met in Mumbai to form a political military movement based on the Black Panthers, the black party in the United States of America, founded in 1966, which was Marxist and revolutionary in nature. According to them, the oppressed should be mobilized, because neither the Indian government nor the Congress nor the capitalists would change their policy of exploitation. Even the Republican Party of India (RPI), a pro-Ambedkar party, had become corrupt and power hungry. On 15 August 1973, the first public protest was organized in Mumbai to celebrate Independence Day as a 'black' day. Then the *Dalit Panthers Manifesto* was published. It must be noted that the term Dalit here

refers to all Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Buddhists, workers, poor farmers, women and all politically, economically or religiously oppressed people (Joshi 1986: 141-7; Dangle 1992b: 253-4; Gokhale 1993: 264-7). A little later the organization split into many factions, of which most exist even today, but carry no weight in terms of the numerical strength of their active members. Lata Murugkar (1991: 98, 101 and 217) has noticed an obvious lack of democracy and pragmatism in the organization. From the beginning, the Dalit Panthers did not succeed in getting rid of their image as a movement of Mahar intellectuals separated from the Mahars living in the countryside and the other lower castes. Public support was not enough. Another problem with the Dalit Panthers was their relationship with the Buddhists and the Marxists (Gokhale 1993: 278-85; Murugkar 1991: 217; Omvedt 1994a: 339). Raja Dhale, a Mahar, born in 1942, founder member of the Dalit Panthers, and currently one of the leaders of the RPI, thinks that the movement to convert to Buddhism is the only way to get rid of the caste system in India. Only Buddhism will reunite all the oppressed people in the world with the aim of a universal alliance. This emphasis on Buddhism led to a certain separation of the Dalit Panthers from the other progressive movements. Namdeo Dhasal, another founder member of the Dalit Panthers, did not share Dhale's views on religious exclusivity and felt that caste was a problem of social classes. According to him, religion should not have been brought into the Dalit movement for liberation. It is thus that Dhasal wanted an alliance with the communists, whereas Dhale saw the communists as enemies to be fought.

Regarding the present day situation Jogdand (1991: 164) says that the Ambedkarite movement has lost its militant character and that there is some stagnation. D.R. Waghmare (1995: 7-8 and 188) thinks that the lack of unity within the different groups is responsible for the tapering off of the movement. Indeed, the movement went through a significant division and several different institutions were formed. Instead of one party, today the RPI is divided into several competing groups. The absence of a single party representing all the untouchables and the loss of the leaders' popularity have led to the delicate situation in which the group finds itself.

But the disintegration of the Buddhist movement in Maharashtra is also due to the social hierarchy that exists in the Mahar community (Guru 1997b: 33-4). The separation of the Mahars into several social

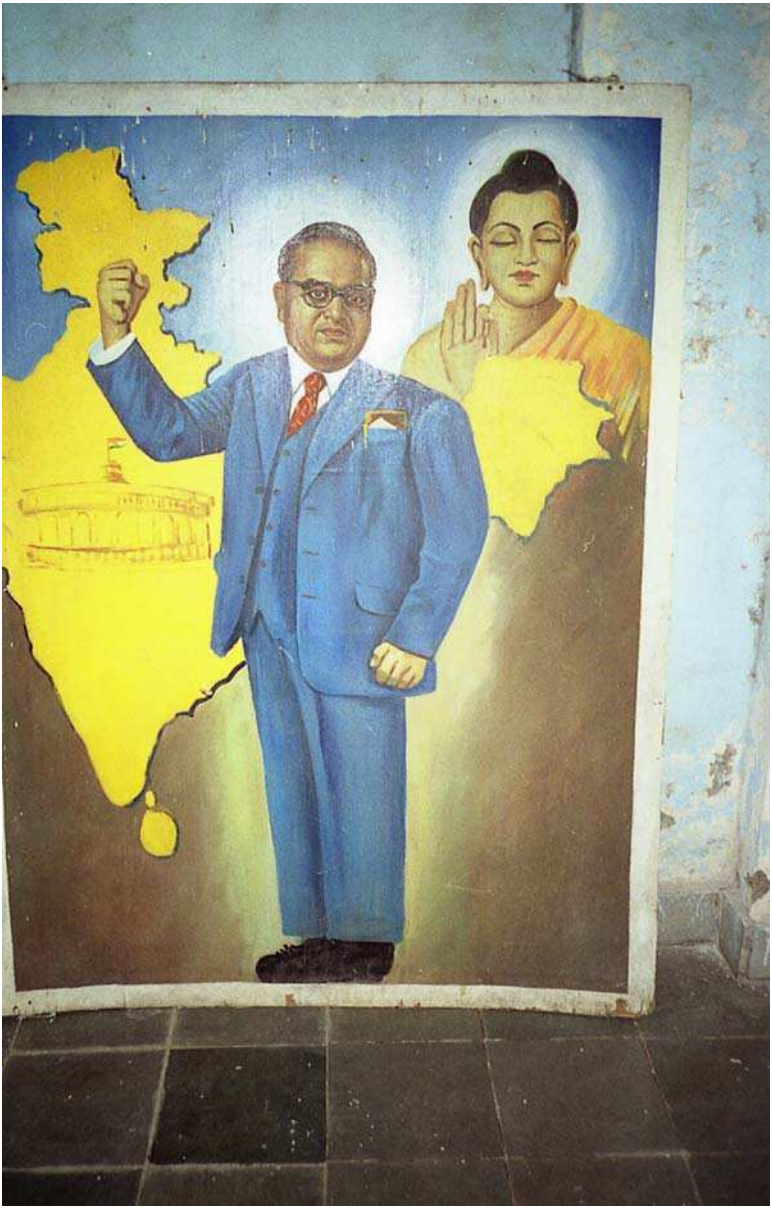

Fig. 4: ‘I’ll make India Buddhist’, poster.

classes has become an undeniable fact. In spite of the social ascent, marginalization and misery have become the fate of most of the Buddhists in Maharashtra who live in the slums and in faraway villages. Only in big cities like Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune and Aurangabad, does a small middle class of government employees live in fairly comfortable conditions. This class refuses often to identify with the Dalit movement, because it is a pejorative term, signifying poverty. Zelliot (1979a: 300) believed in very strong ties among the elite and the people. However, today it is clear that the social segmentation of the Mahars has had negative consequences on the movement as a whole. Nevertheless, the Ambedkarite movement did not fail. The Buddhists have a new image of themselves and they claim a new social status. They have chosen the path of independence, resistance, and protest. They have joined neither the Hindu nationalists, nor the Congress. They have opted for a specific and autonomous representation. At the same time, they have questioned their society as a whole, the caste system and the Hindu social order without giving up their collective identity.

SECTARIANISM OR ISOLATION? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUDDHISTS AND 'UNTOUCHABLE' HINDUS

The Dalit movement was in its beginning, at least in Nagpur, 'a Mahar movement' (Moon 2001: 93). But if Ambedkar and the Dalit activists did not want to create an exclusive Buddhist/Mahar group, why did the Chambhars, the Dhors and the Matangs not convert? Why is the Dalit movement still dominated by the Mahars? Did the Mahars 'betray' Ambedkar? We are given the impression that the Mahars have appropriated Ambedkar's persona for their own sake. It seems that he became *their* leader and the Dalit movement became *their* movement. It is contradictory that the Buddhists reproach the other untouchable communities for not following the appeal of Ambedkar, for being backward, for still believing in Hindu gods, and for not succeeding in uniting themselves.

Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 46) and Zelliot (1992a: 106) describe the segmentations among the 'untouchables' in Maharashtra. Both report that the Chambhars would be the highest in the hierarchy and they would be 'superior' to the Mahars, the Matangs and the Dhors who would be at the bottom of the social ladder. However, this hierarchy

is contested by each community. Anthropologists like N.N. Kundu (1993: 335) confirm that the Buddhists thought they were the 'best' among all untouchables, superior to the Chambhars, the Dhors, and the Matangs. Fitzgerald (1993: 36) quotes a Buddhist from the Kalumnori taluka who refuses to give water to the Matangs. True, I have never observed such attitude. Probably the social differences between the people in the villages and the people in the cities explain such behaviour; my study is mainly based in the urban areas. However caste differences are raised at the time of matrimonial alliances and a marriage between a Mahar, Chambhar or Matang is looked down upon, and is almost impossible. D.R. Waghmare (1995: 194) gives the example of a Matang who married a Buddhist and was excluded from his community. When he went to seek the help of Buddhists he found that the latter never considered him to be one of them. I myself heard a similar story, of a Buddhist Matang from Pune, who could not find a husband for his daughters amongst the Buddhists, originally Mahars.

Should we call the egalitarian cry of the Buddhists mere rhetoric? In my opinion, the problem is more complex in that the Mahars never denounce the non-Mahars publicly; on the contrary they invite them to join in.[20] The question here is who isolates whom? Are not the Mahars rejected by the other untouchables?

The Chambhars

The Chambhars are the cobblers, once considered untouchable. Their situation is different from the Mahars because of the fixed place they have in traditional village economy: They worked with leather, and they made shoes (Enthoven 1975, 41: 260-71; Fuchs 1981: 209). Their relations with the Mahars seem to have been strained from the beginning. The Chambhars considered the Mahars, Dhors and Matangs as inferior and fought for a better position in society (Danda and Samanta 1993: 237). A majority of them hesitated to join the Ambedkarite movement. Some of them were temporary allies: such as S.N. Shivtarkar (1891-1966), first secretary of the Bahishkriti Hitakarini Sabha, who later opposed the Yeola declaration advocating conversion to a non-Hindu religion. Shivtarkar rejoined the Congress party and founded his own association, the Rohidas Samaj Panchayat Sangha in 1952 (Kshirsagar 1994: 333-5).

A counter example is Pandurang Nathuram Rajbhoj, an Ambedkar supporter (Gautam 1995; Naito 1997: 203-10). Born in 1905 in a Chambhar family in the Nashik district, he studied in Pune. In 1927, he participated in the Mahad *satyagraha*. In 1928 he published the journal *Dalit Bandhu* (Friend of the Oppressed) and joined Ambedkar and became the general secretary of the Scheduled Castes Federation. In 1955, he rejoined the Congress party. Rajbhoj was hesitant to follow Ambedkar's call to convert in October 1956. He withdrew his decision two years later and converted in November 1958 during the World Fellowship of Buddhists Conference in Bangkok.[21] He died in 1984.

Rajbhoj is an exception. The Chambhars largely consider Ambedkar a political leader who exclusively represented the Mahar interests, and formed their own associations and chose different political allies (Saglio 1997: 7). It is this issue of status and the rivalry that stemmed from it, which determine the Chambhar attitudes towards the Buddhist movement even today. Madhau Kondvilker (1985), one of the rare Dalit writers who is of Chambhar origin, describes how he was criticized by members of his own caste for having sympathized with Ambedkar. He published a critique in which he accused the Chambhar society of being superstitious. He also asks why Ambedkar did not inspire confidence in them. In reply, another Chambhar reproached him for ridiculing the Chambhar community, and not writing how and why the Chambhars are superior to the Mahars. (An argument is that Chambhar women have fairer skin than the Mahars, as if this is proof of their superiority.) They also consider the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism as the cause of economic difficulty for the Chambhars. They say that they dislike Ambedkar and the Mahars for their rebellions (Konvilker 1985: 154-5). A Chambhar from Pune makes the following remarks during an interview in the same vein:

> We respect Doctor Ambedkar and the other SC communities, like the Mahars. But we do not really take them into our hearts. Our leaders are Rohidas and Jagjivan Ram. We, the Chambhars, have remained Hindus and we have followed Gandhiji. We did not want separatism, as Doctor Ambedkar wanted it. . . . Like the BJP and the Shiv Sena we do not favour the Buddhists.

This interview calls for an explanation. The Chambhars differentiate amongst themselves according to their leaders: Rohidas or Ravidas,

a *Vaishnava* saint of Chamar origin belonging to the fifteenth century and disciple of Ramananda, recited devotional poems in Varanasi. The reference to Jagjivan Ram (1908-86), is more interesting: a Chamar originally from Bihar, he studied at the Benares Hindu University and in Calcutta. He shared the same fate as many of his supporters: in his youth, he suffered from discrimination, could not drink water from a public well, and barbers refused to cut his hair. Disgusted with the injustice, Jagjivan Ram founded the Ravidas Maha Sabha in 1928. In 1930, he rejoined the Congress party and three years later, in 1933, he became the secretary of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Bihar. In 1934 he became one of the secretaries of the Depressed Classes League. Jagjivan Ram was opposed to the Yeola declaration for conversion, which he dismissed as 'a mere political move', and even refused to allow the Buddhists access to the quotas reserved for SCs. He was appointed Labour Minister in the Nehru cabinet and was a Member of the Parliament from 1946 to 1977 (Kshirsagar 1994: 310-13; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 207-8).

The above argument underlines two important aspects. On the one hand, the Chambhars insist on a specific social communitarianism with reference to Ravidas and Jagjivan Ram. On the other hand, they accuse Ambedkar and the Mahars of exclusiveness. We get the feeling that they would have liked to join the Mahars but the latter would have refused. Perhaps this indicates a conflict of universal/egalitarian ideals and caste identities. It is this complex and apparently contradictory idea that best characterizes the relations between the different untouchable castes in India.

The Matangs

In order to explore the inter-community interactions, we must look finally at the Matangs. In the traditional village economy, they worked as messengers, and executioners, castrated buffaloes and played music during festivals (Fuchs 1981: 166). They had their own sector of production—basket-making. However, this was largely affected by the arrival of the British, who imported cordage into India and set up their own factories for its production. This industrialization was harmful to the economic life of the Matangs and added to their impoverishment. This was worsened by the fact that the Matangs were seen as a criminal caste by the British (Gokhale 1993: 100; Miller 1972: 363). Consequently, they did not have access

to the public sector services such as the army or the railways. Compared to the Mahars, they did not have the same means to guarantee them social improvement. This explains why they were one of the most 'backward' castes amongst all the backward communities. According to the 1961 census, the high number of child marriages and the high rate of illiteracy indicate that this community was more marginalized than any other SC.[22]

How do the Matangs refer to themselves in relation to the Mahars? Kotani (1997b: 60.64) shows that the Mahar-Matang relations were always marked by feelings such as competitiveness, domination, and subordination. Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 46) reports that the relations are still strained. However, after Ambedkar's renunciation of Hinduism, certain Matangs thought that conversion was a means to liberty and equality. The participants in the Bombay Presidency Mang Conference in 1936 expressed their full confidence in Ambedkar and decided to follow him (Kunte 1982: 140; Naito 1997: 200). At the same time they found their own political leader—Annabhau Sathe (1920-69), a Matang from Wategaon, now in the Sangli district. A writer and supporter of the Communist Party, he wrote poems, plays, revolutionary songs and short stories (Kshirsagar 1994: 325-7; Sathe 1992; Miller 1972). The Matangs consider him as their hero today, celebrating his birthday every year.

Summary

Ambedkar's idea of creating a unified party of the oppressed did not succeed. The old caste barriers did not get wiped out. In Maharashtra only the Mahars converted to Buddhism. Mahars, Chambhars and Matangs continue to differentiate amongst themselves on the basis of their traditional professions, political alliances, and religious identities. Interactions among these communities are marked by conflicting exchange and competitive behaviour. The tensions between the Mahars and other 'untouchable' castes seem even to have worsened. This phenomenon is characterized by three factors:

First, religion is by default an area where social differences arise: the Chambhars are proud of 'their' poet Ravidas, the Mahars of 'their' Buddha. In fact, according to Waghmare (1995: 207), the differences between the Mahars and the other untouchable communities were most evident when they decided to convert to Buddhism. Soon after the Yeola Conference, the leaders of the

Chambhar and the Dhor communities protested. They rejected the idea that conversion was obligatory for all untouchable castes (Gokhale 1993: 167). Consequently, with the exception of few rare examples, the Dhors, Chambhars and Matangs remained Hindus. We can thus make a hypothesis that the conversion of the Mahars widened the gap, which already existed, between the Mahars and the other communities. Even if Ambedkar wanted to unify the untouchables in the name of Buddhism, did not the Mahars isolate themselves even more by converting?

Second, the political preferences of the untouchables in Maharashtra are diverse. Ambedkar's efforts to unify the Mahars, Matangs and Chambhars were opposed by many untouchable activists, who were not from the Mahar community. They only saw Ambedkar as a leader of the Mahar community. The rivalry between Gandhi and Ambedkar was indeed a decisive factor in separating the Chambhars and the Matangs. The former were supporters of Gandhi and the Congress, whereas the Mahars detested Gandhi and looked upon him as Ambedkar's enemy.

Antagonism based on caste differences and political alliance persists even today. Kolhe and Thombare (1998: 150) give an example of a Buddhist from Ghatkopar who refused to vote for the BSP because Kanshi Ram, the leader of the party, is a Chamar. Similarly, Vithal Sathe, the political leader of the Matangs, left the RPI because it was a Mahar party. 'The RPI does not give enough attention to the problems of the Matangs. That's why we have left that party. But we might probably rejoin the party and protest against such arrogance within the party. The RPI must be made to look into the problems of the Matangs' (Kolhe and Thombare 1998: 150). In fact, the other untouchable castes vote for different parties, such as the Congress, Shiv Sena[23] and the communists.[24]

The quota system clearly portrays the conflicts between the Mahars and the other untouchable communities. The Mahars dominate the posts reserved for the SC. True, this can be justified by their numerical strength, but it is obvious that they had a disproportionate access to the quotas, because of the organization, mobilization and politicizing.[25] This situation seems to be continuing. Thus it is hardly surprising that the Chambhars, Dhors and Matangs have their reservations about the Mahars, whom they accuse of monopolizing reserved posts.

We can conclude that this is something comparable to the relationship between the Jatavs and the Balmikis of Uttar Pradesh or the Iravas and the Pulayas of Kerala, who are continually at war with one another (Deliège 1993: 258; Saglio 1997; Prashad 2000). Taking into account the different social and religious identities and the political strategies, can we define the untouchables as a coherent social category? We have found that this is almost impossible, because of the diversity and rivalry existing among the communities. Now we also understand what makes the Dalit project so difficult. All social movements, by their very essence, are interactions—sometimes harmonious, sometimes conflicting—among the various players/actors and the different social groups.

EXCLUSION AND APPROPRIATION: DENYING DALIT AUTONOMY

Having discussed the interactions between the Mahars and other marginalized communities, an analysis of the dynamics of power between the Dalits and the Hindu nationalists emerges as of particular interest. Dalits criticize the Hindu social order. As we have indicated, they identify the upper Hindu castes, especially the nationalist forces of the BJP and the RSS, as their social and political adversaries. How do the Hindu nationalists react to this challenge?

There are very different views on this subject and we should be careful about making general conclusions. Let us look back into history to outline the situation at the outset. The Hindu elite had revived the *varna-ashrama-dharma* as the foundation of the Hindu society. Despite significant differences in the opinions of Vivekananda, Golwalkar, Radhakrishnan, and Gandhi, each of them has defended the varnas as natural and ideal categories.[26] They asked for the abolishment of untouchability and supported Ambedkar, at least in their speeches, but could not accept the idea that the untouchables could form a distinct and autonomous group. Gandhi subscribed to this paternalist attitude by categorically refusing separate electorates for the untouchables. The Hindu nationalists could not tolerate the untouchables' demand for political representation and Ambedkar's repeated outcry to renounce Hinduism. When Ambedkar announced that he was going to convert to Buddhism, the critics lay low because Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism

Fig. 5: Gate of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in Aurangabad (photograph by the author).

were considered a part of Hinduism. Conversion to a non-Indic religion would have been considered a betrayal to the ancestral traditions.[27]

Violence

This is not to accuse the Hindu nationalists for all the riots that have taken place in these last few years. Riots are an expression of social antagonism, of an increasing polarization between the Mahar Buddhists and the Hindu nationalists. The most violent of these riots took place when the University of Aurangabad changed its name to Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. Riots broke out in towns and villages in 1978. Buddhists were killed and hundreds of houses were burnt. In the Marathwada region, stations, offices, banks, and other public places were destroyed (Mendelson and Vicziany 1998: 73-5). Then the revolt of 1988 followed, sparked by the book *Riddles in Hinduism*, which was the fourth volume of Ambedkar's complete works. His polemical criticism of the Hindu myths, specially those of Rama and Krishna, had not been published until then; it was seen as an insult and an offence by the Hindus. Published and then censored by the government in October 1987, it became the object of large protests. Thousands of activists asked for the revocation of this censure and the book was finally released for the public (Suresh 1998: 369; Zelliot 1992a: 181).

Statues of Doctor Ambedkar and symbols of the Dalit movement, are the favourite targets of the adversaries. 'The black mark' as Ram Vilas Paswan calls it, refers to the major incident that took place in Ghatkopar.[28] On 11 January 1997, the residents of Ramabai Nagar,[29] mostly inhabited by Mahar Buddhists, discovered that their Ambedkar statue was decorated with a garland of slippers. A large crowd gathered there in no time, fuelled by sentiments of anger and protest. This garland of slippers was an insult and an intolerable sacrilege. The police arrived and suddenly opened fire. Ten people were killed and twenty-nine others injured. The next day, the opposition party called for a general strike. They accused the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance for this incident. In Mumbai, traffic was disturbed, shops remained closed, stone throwing took place, buses and cars were set on fire. Other people died during violent encounters with the police. On 13 July, when the deceased were being cremated in Ghatkopar, men of his own party attacked Ramdas Athavale,

politician from the RPI and former minister. Athavale made a critique of the RPI leadership.[30] Later, Vilas Ghogre, Dalit poet and RPI member, committed suicide. The motive remains unknown, but it seems that he wanted to show solidarity for the victims of the massacre.[31] In fact, activists and politicians protested all over India against the police violence in Mumbai. In Maharashtra, the opposition kept demanding the resignation of the government; Manohar Joshi refused to resign, but promised severe punishment to those responsible for this incident.

What can be said about the idea that the Hindu nationalists would have provoked this incident (Guru 1997a)? The BJP-Shiv Sena alliance defended itself against such accusation. Thackeray accused the 'underworld' forces for wanting to destabilize the government in power. He accused Bhujbal, an ex-Shiv Sena member, of wanting to provoke riots. The Congress, in collaboration with the RPI, would have thus tried to regain the power they lost during the 1995 legislative elections. Shiv Sena activists, 'outraged' by this accusation, attacked Bhujbal's residence in Mumbai and stabbed an RPI activist in Kolhapur. Thackeray followed a dual strategy: denouncing his political enemies and praising Ambedkar in his ideological discourse: 'Doctor Ambedkar does not belong to any particular caste. He belongs to the nation. He can be compared to Shivaji. Maharashtra, particularly the Shiv Sena, has a deep respect for Babasaheb.'[32] At the same time, he did not hide his contempt for the Mahar Buddhists: 'I have Dalits in my organization. . . . But I differentiate among Dalits and neo-Buddhists. The neo-Buddhists do not like the Dalits because they did not convert to Buddhism.'[33] These two quotations reveal the Shiv Sena's subtle strategy: to take Ambedkar as well as the 'true' Dalit movement into their fold as isolating Mahar Buddhists at the same time. But before going into this strategy in more detail, other hypotheses explaining this incident should be mentioned. According to some, the people responsible for this must be simple apolitical criminals. To others, the incident could be the result of rivalry among the different RPI groups.[34] This is unlikely given that this was not the first time an Ambedkar statue was attacked. Van der Weid and Poitevin (1978: 30-1) have enumerated five cases where Ambedkar statues were dishonoured or broken in many towns of Maharashtra, in one year—1972. In 1997, there were similar incidents in Shrirampur, in Malegaon, and in Aurangabad.[35] Buddhists and followers of Ambedkar are often victims of collective violence.

The anti-Dalit discourse

There are two principal trends in thinking which characterize the Hindu nationalists *vis-à-vis* Ambedkar and the Dalit movement today. Open criticism is one of the trends; the second trend, more in favour of the group, is a 'paternalistic' reaction, under the pretext of protecting them. Let us start with the criticisms that are most often quoted with reference to Ambedkar: his lack of patriotism, his opposition to social integration, his dislike of Hinduism and his resentment against the other castes. A brahman from Pune, a political activist, and a lawyer now retired, told me:

> Ambedkar's thoughts are all of British and American origin. Ambedkar was influenced by these cultures. He felt that the Indian society should be like the American society. . . . He was never encouraging us. He always saw the Indian society from a negative angle. His Buddhism is not the true Buddhism. True Buddhism does not preach hatred for the other castes. Ambedkar invented a religion that is based on hatred for the Hindu "touchables". The Buddha never hated anyone; he became a saint. That is why educated people never followed Ambedkar. But, I am not against Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, because Buddhism is a part of the Indian Way of Life and it does not question the Indian culture.

Following the same vein, Arun Shourie, former editor of the *Indian Express*, who is closely associated with the BJP, published *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts Which Have Been Erased,* in 1997. Shourie tries to change the 'false image' of Ambedkar, who actually would have been a corrupt and power-hungry politician. He would have been opposed to the liberalization of India and he would have collaborated with the British. Moreover, he could not have been the Father of the Constitution, since he is not its author. It is not surprising that the book led to a scandal all over India (Beltz 1998). Some thought of the book as a precious contribution to con-temporary history while others criticized its pretentious quality.[36] In Maharashtra RPI politicians Gavai and Athavale suggested that the book should be banned, but the authorities in Delhi and Mumbai refused to do so.[37]

Should this book be seen as a new attempt of the Hindu nationalist forces to combat the movement launched by Ambedkar? This is Omvedt's (1997) and Swapan Biswas' (1998) theory. They see in it the hatred and the fear of the upper castes towards Ambedkar, who was one of the greatest adversaries of brahmanical Hinduism in India.

This book is still controversial. Ambedkar's followers recently complained about the book and asked for compensations.[38]

In addition to the personality of Ambedkar, the quotas, a symbol of the Dalit movement, are used to question the Mahar Buddhists. In fact, they are accused of abusing the system. I have a strong feeling that the SC, especially the Mahars, are used as scapegoats. The quotas are criticized for the decline and lack of progress in the Indian society. In fact, the Mahar domination in this sector is a classic controversy regarding the Buddhist movement. Here is a recent example. On 14 April 1997, Manohar Joshi commemorated Ambedkar's birthday (Fig. 14). He accused 'a certain SC community' of exploiting the quotas reserved for the weaker sections of society by the Indian Constitution. He concluded that the Dalits were exploited not only by the upper castes, but also by other Dalits. The audience understood that he was referring to the Mahars. Joshi ended his speech by asking the people to join the Shiv Sena and isolate the Mahars from the other Dalits.[39] To sum up, the anti-Dalit discourse takes place at different levels: the quota system is criticized as an obstacle to social progress; the access to the quotas is not proportionate; the Dalit parties (RPI, BSP) are written off as political hazards, and the concept of Dalit implies that the fight between social classes is refuted. The anti-Hindu stand would threaten the ancestral traditions and would be an intolerable offence.

Politics of appropriation

As we have already indicated, confrontation is but one aspect of the Hindu nationalist policy. There is another trend of thought, which is very different, but no less powerful: this tries to harmonize and neutralize the relationship between the Hindus and the Dalits. *A priori* this is nothing great. Politicians are sympathetic towards Ambedkar to some extent. No one would think of an open confrontation with the Dalit movement. Ambedkar has become a national hero, and his authority cannot be questioned by any major political party. For instance, I quoted Bal Thackeray who said that the Shiv Sena has nothing against the Dalits. Similarly, Raj Thackeray said that he would like to improve the relations between the Shiv Sena and the Dalits. The upliftment of the Dalits was an integral part of his electoral campaign in 1998.[40] Another example is that of end-March of 1999 when riots between the Dalits and the Shiv Sena

were about to break out. This was due to the mysterious death of Bhai Sangare, former activist of the Dalit Panthers who later became a Shiv Sena supporter. Udhav Thackeray, Bal Thackeray's son, immediately appeased the activists to avoid riots at all costs. Praveen Swami believes that this was a move made by the Shiv Sena to influence the Dalit votes during the next legislative elections.[41]

More interestingly, there are constant efforts by the nationalist Hindus to integrate Ambedkar in their own ideology (Lal 1986; Hansen 1999: 226-7). For some time the RSS has been appropriating Ambedkar with the help of the Samajika Samarasata Manca (Movement for social homogenization). The aim of this movement is to fight the practice of untouchability and the perversion of the caste system (Seshadri 1998: 139). Ambedkar's birthdays are thus celebrated, social gatherings among Ambedkarites are organized. Dr Ambedkar is compared to the likes of the great nationalist Hindu leaders. Hegdewar, like Ambedkar, fought in a symbolic manner against untouchability, by asking all the RSS activists to share their meals with their Mahar colleagues (Deoras 1984: 19-20). Similarly, Golwalkar, chief of the RSS from 1940 to 1973, compared Ambedkar with Vivekananda (Thengadi 1997: 63-5). By imbibing Ambedkar's ideas, the RSS wants to change its image of an upper caste movement and influence its followers in favour of Ambedkar (Pandit 1994; Guru 1991a).

Chivande (1992: 37), a Maharashtrian nationalist, proposes a comparison of Ambedkar with Savarkar and Shivaji, because 'their opinions on religion were similar'. It is obvious that Ambedkar is here 'Hinduized'. Dhananjay Keer (1994 [1954]: 466-7, 503-22), author of a celebrated biography of Ambedkar, had already described him as 'a patriotic Hindu reformer', who opted for an Indian religion instead of converting to Islam or Christianity. Thus, it is not surprising that M.P. Rege (1997: 195-6) states that the conflicts between the Hindus and the Buddhists are not religious but political and ideological. According to him Hindus can consider Ambedkar as a Hindu *avatara*.

In the same manner, it should be noted that the Buddha, to some an *avatara* of Vishnu, is part of a large family of Hindu gods. It is only in the context of the new Buddhism that this appropriation has become a controversial issue. On the Hindu front, Buddhism was considered a specific branch of the Hindu school of thought. For Vivekananda the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta was the

accomplishment of Buddhism, and for Gandhi the fundamental principles of Hinduism and Buddhism were the same. Similarly, all large Hindu organizations such as the RSS, the VHP and the Ramakrishna Mission appropriated Buddhism for their concept of a 'Hindu' India (Harshananda 1982; Ranganathananda 1993; Vivekananda 1993 and 1995b; All India Arya (Hindu) Dharma Seva Sangha 1986).

This discussion is still on. In November 1998, L.K. Advani of the BJP, at that time the home minister, said that Buddha did not want to create a separate religion, but to revive the old ideas of the Indo-Aryan tradition. There was a wave of protests following this announcement with the All India Bhikkhu Sangha sending a petition of protest to the prime minister.[42] More recently, Ram Svarup explained that Ambedkar did the right thing by converting to Buddhism, which is an integral part of the Sanatana Dharma.[43]

This discussion compelled the Buddhists to take a stand, to defend themselves, and to constantly reiterate their differences. During the debates and public manifestations, using pamphlets and via many publications, they reproached the Hindus for taking over the Buddha and Babasaheb (Ajnat 1994; Kantowsky 1999: 142). This shows us to what extent the Buddhist discourse is a product of interactions, communications, and negotiations among many different socio-religious groups. The Buddhist discourse presented in the following chapter must therefore be interpreted as a message meant not only for the Buddhist, but also for the other Scheduled Castes, Marathas, brahmans, or the Shiv Sena activists, in other words, for the entire Indian society.

NOTES

1. *Vada* signifies 'residential area' or 'hamlet'. The Mahar hamlets were traditionally located outside villages and towns.
2. According to Béteille (1966), this class distribution is not only typical of Maharashtrian society, being also prevalent in Tamil society.
3. This caste, which consists mainly of people who work with leather, has several names: they are called Camhara, Carmakara, or Cambhara.
4. Matang and Mang are now interchangeable.
5. The practice of reservations for the untouchables dates back to the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in 1918.
6. Cf. 'Dalit Sena for quota extension to the private sector', *ToI*, 15 April 1995.

7. D.C. Ahir, in his autobiography (1992: 123) narrates how he lost the right to quotas after having registered his conversion to Buddhism with the administrative authorities.
8. The Christians are still excluded from the SC because they are a religious minority that is too small to form a political party of their own (Sharad Saxena, 'In Quest of a Caste, Do Dalit Christians Merit Reservations?', *India Today*, 15 May 1995: 31; J. Kananaiklal, 'Discrimination Against Dalit Converts with Special Reference to Dalit Converts to Christianity', *RS*, 37, 4 December 1990: 60-4).
9. The Congress(I) won 75 out of 228 seats (P. Swamy and Lyla Bavadam, 'Fractured Mandate in Maharashtra', *Frontline*, 5 November 1999: 27).
10. This is not a new idea as Tilak and Savarkar had already preached on the same lines: Shivaji as the champion of *Hindutva* and a pan-Hindu leader (Savarkar 1999: 43).
11. Aurangabad (Aurangzeb's town) founded by Aurangzeb (1658-1707) the Mughal emperor, was renamed Sambhajinagar (Sambhaji's town), after Shivaji's successor, executed by Aurangzeb. This renaming allows us to rewrite history: the victim becomes the victor.
12. Interview with Smruti Kapoor, *India Today*, 31 March 1995: 97.
13. On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid was razed to the ground in Ayodhya by Hindu militants, members of the BJP, the RSS, the Bajrang Dal and the VHP. This destruction had terrible consequences: killings took place all over India, and the secular nature of the country was being questioned. According to Hindu nationalist ideologists, the mosque had been constructed at the birthplace (*janmabhumi*) of Rama (cf. the leaflets, like that of M.B. Chande, *Shree Ram Janmabhoomi*, distributed by the RSS, Nagpur 1992). Till now, the archaeological excavations have shown no traces of a Hindu temple which existed prior to this mosque, neither in brick, or in stone (D. Mandal, *Ayodhya: Archeology After Demolition*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1993).
14. Cf. 'Make Thackeray Files Public, Orders Judge Shrikrishna', *ToI*, 18 March 1997; 'Government to Reveal Thackeray Files', *Ind. Exp.*, 2 April 1997; 'Saving Thackeray is Patriotic', *Ind. Exp.*, 6 April 1997.
15. Cf. 'Report not rejected outright: Joshi', *Ind. Exp.*, 30 August 1998; 'Shiv Sena's Saffron March 1998: Why Against Shrikrishna?', *Ind. Exp.*, 12 October 1998.
16. Cf. 'Shiv Sena's Saffron March 1998: The Nation of Our Dreams, Balasaheb Thackeray's Vision', *Ind. Exp.*, 12 October 1998.
17. In a personal conversation, Maren Bellwinkel–Schempp confirms inter-caste marriages in Uttar Pradesh wherein the husband belonged to the Jatav Buddhists and the wife was of brahman origin. But she specifies that these examples are limited and they are only with reference to the civil servants who, thanks to the quotas, have gained a very prestigious social status.

18. The publishing house Sugava Prakashan in Pune distributes Dalit and Buddhist literature in Marathi. Vilas and Usha Wagh take care of it. They are local social activists and intellectuals, and followers of Ambedkar.
19. The name Milinda serves a purpose. An Indo-Greek ruler from the first century BC, he became famous for his discussions with the Buddhist monk Nagasena.
20. The Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference took place on 30 May 1936. B. Venkatrao (1936: 8) says on this occasion: 'We have blindly imbibed the atrocious hereditary traits of the ailment called Hinduism, by separating into different sections. Now we are no longer Mahars, Matangs or Bhangis, but we are a unified group. We are all victims of the uncompromising Hindus. We must create a common front to fight these forces and prevent being exploited.'
21. In September 1959, Rajbhoj's wife and other members of his family were initiated into Buddhism by the Dalai Lama (*JMBSI*, 1959, 67, 2: 59; *JMBSI*, 1959, 67, 10: 309).
22. In 1961, only 9.9 per cent of the Matangs were literate compared to 15.7 per cent of the Mahars and 21.2 per cent of the Chambhars. Similarly, in 1971, they recorded the highest rate of illiteracy amongst all the castes (*Census Report of India 1961*, *Maharashtra State, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*; Kakade 1990: 93).
23. In her study on the Charmakars in Dharavi, Saglio (1997: 19) shows that they entered the political scenario under the influence of the Shiv Sena.
24. Dada Kamble, a social activist of Matang origin, recalls that Annabhau Sathe was a communist and pleads that the Matangs reunite under the red flag. The model will be that of the Mahars, reunited under the blue flag of the RPI (Kamble 1997: 5).
25. The distribution of scholarships in the public education sector is a well documented example. Approximately 80 per cent of the those who receive the scholarships from the SC category are of Mahar origin (Patwardhan 1973: 89; Kakade 1990: 141).
26. Similarly the contemporary Hindu nationalist doctrine resorts to this concept in order to defend an organicist theory of the Hindu society (cf. Jaffrelot 1993: 98-9).
27. Organizations such as the VHP and the RSS denounce the Arab countries and Pakistan, for wanting to convert the Hindus to Islam, and they want the Christian missionaries to quit India (Sastry 1983: 10-11; Seshadri 1988: 58-83). At the turn of this century an Australian missionary and his two sons were killed in Orissa; nuns were raped in Madhya Pradesh; the VHP, and the RSS have been held responsible for all these acts ('Rape of Nuns Could be a Strategy of VHP, BD and the RSS: Digvijay', *Ind. Exp*, 1 October 1998; 'VHP Demands Foreign Missionaries to quit India', *ToI*, 1 October 1998; 'Killings a Monumental Aberration: Narayan', *ToI*, January 1999).

28. *The Hindu*, International Edition, 13 July 1997.
29. This residential area is named after Rambai Dhutre (1896-1935), married to the young Ambedkar of fifteen years, in 1906, when she herself was only six.
30. Cf. Interview with Lyla Bavadam, *Frontline*, 8 August 1997: 17.
31. Cf. *ToI*, 16 July 1997.
32. Cf. A. Dhawale, 'The Sena Against Dalit', *Frontline*, 8 August 1997: 15.
33. Cf. Interview with R. Padmanabhan, *Frontline*, 8 August 1997: 9.
34. Cf. R. Bhushan and I. Joshi, 'Fractured Legacy', *Outlook*, 30 July 1997: 24-6.
35. Cf. *Ind. Exp*., 17-18 March 1997; *ToI*, 17-18 March 1997; *ToI*, 10-11 April 1997; *Ind. Exp*., 25 September 1997.
36. See for example: A. Malik, 'Messiah with Feet of Clay', *India Today*, 30 June 1997: 66; J.N. Dixit, 'Messiah Brought to Book', *Ind. Exp*., 13 July 1997; M. Paranjape 'A Troubled Legacy', *The Hindu*, International Edition, 4 October 1997; P. Bidwai 'Attacking Ambedkar, the Dwija's Last War-Cry', *ToI*, August 1997; V.N. Gadgil, 'Falsifying the Truth. Although Scholarly Arun Shourie's Portrayal of Ambedkar is Destructive and Misconceived', *Outlook*, 30 July 1997: 32-3; S. Muralidharan, 'Maligning Ambedkar', *Frontline*, 8 August 1997: 21-3.
37. Cf. *Ind. Exp*., 26 August 1997.
38. Cf. 'Defamation Case Against Shourie', *Ind. Exp*., 28 September 1998.
39. Cf. *Puné Plus*, 15 April 1997.
40. Cf. 'Shiv Sena's Saffron March 1998: Lifting the Lower Strata of the Society', *Ind. Exp*., 12 October 1998.
41. Cf. Praveen Swami, 'A Battle for Dalit Votes', *Frontline*, 7 May 1999: 40-2.
42. Cf. 'Protest Letter to Advani's Utterances—AIBS', *Yug Udhodhan*, 4 August 1998: 18.
43. Cf. R. Svarup, 'Buddhist Route and Upanishadic Tradition: Complementary Religions', *Ind. Exp.*, 9 January 1999; see also D.V. Singh (1994: 53) and Viswanathan (1996: 111).

4. Buddhism: Discourse of Revolt, Liberation and Emancipation

Almost fifty years have gone by since the first waves of collective conversion of 1956. The generation which played an active role in these events has grown old. In spite of this, Buddhism has become an indisputable reality. It is preserved and taught by institutions and is revived time and again through rites and festivals. How did this new Buddhism come into being? This chapter brings together personal interviews, texts, religious tracts, songs and poems and assumes a sense of continuity between *orality,* literature and artistic creations. These different 'texts' in their various forms are scattered over both space and time and are read as a collective discursive expression.

CREATING ONE'S OWN LITERATURE

The notion of literature should be used in a larger sense that covers not only poetic works, but religious tracts and the daily press as well. The Buddhists are credited with having created their own literature in different fields: poetry, prose, autobiographies, political publications, and magazines. These writings may be recent, but their beginning dates back to the nineteenth century, the period during which the Mahar associations were formed. The Mahars began to invade a new cultural space, a place for discourses, which, thus, challenged the learned and literary scene, dominated by the high castes. In 1904, Shivram Janba Kamble launched the journal *Somavamshiya Mitra*, in Pune. It was a comment on the activities of the Mahar movement and helped strengthen their integration (Gokhale 1993: 76; Bhoite 1999: 35). Ambedkar, himself, always asked his supporters to provide literature that would educate and mobilize the masses. He published a number of periodicals such as

Mukanayaka (1920), *Bahishkrita Bharata* (1927), *Samata* (1929) and *Janata* (1930). He also published scientific journals and wrote articles for the newspapers. This writing activity, however, was not unique to Mahar movement: most movements used this new medium of communication and propaganda.

To realize the crucial role that literature plays for this movement, one needs only to witness a public Buddhist festival in Mumbai, Nagpur, or Pune and visit the innumerable booksellers and look at their range (they often display their products on a large piece of cloth spread on the ground) and collect a number of propaganda leaflets. What is the particularity of Buddhist literature, *bauddha sahitya*? The foremost characteristic is that most of the publications appear in inexpensive editions, are badly printed and are distributed locally. Nevertheless, regional and national distribution is sometimes assured because a lot of publishers travel with their stocks of books and display them during important Buddhist festivals, like Ambedkar's birthday. The themes and subjects are varied: canonical Buddhist texts, such as the *Majjhima Nikaya*, *Digha Nikaya* and *Anguttara Nikaya* translated into Marathi, as well as the non-canonical texts, which are 'classics' all the same, such as the *Buddhacarita* (Lokhande 1991b) and the *Vajrasuci*[1] (Lokhande 1991a; Kulkarni 1992). The innumerable publications and translations of Ambedkar's works in English and Marathi are worth mentioning (Ahir 1997; Ghodesvar 1994; Das 1963-79) as well as the historic (Moray 1985), philosophic (Hadekar 1996; Kausalyayan 1992) and poetic (Jilthe 1992) Buddhist works. And last of all, the manuals of rituals, published by the Buddhist Society of India (1993) and the Buddha Dhamma Education Society of India (1992), by Kirti Patil (1991) and Haribhau Pagare (1983) need to be mentioned.

Ambedkar's hagiography

Descriptions of Ambedkar's life are not only characteristic of Buddhist literature but also of Dalit literature, as it is generally known outside Maharashtra. These accounts of his life (*carita*) are more eulogies than historical descriptions, and can be studied as hagiography. Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist religions favour this literary genre and have always used it to pay homage to religious heroes. Topics of interest include the extraordinary birth, the description

of an intelligent and studious child, an external, influential force that leads the individual towards his destiny, the individual's almost superhuman qualities and abilities, and his mysterious death (Callewaert and Snell 1994; Juergensmeyer 1987).

In the same line of thought certain Buddhists create a noble lineage according to which Ambedkar would belong to the Naga Buddhist clan (Ramteke 1983: 92;). It is said that his birth was prophesied. A wandering ascetic was supposed to have told Ambedkar's father that he would have a son who would stand out in the history of the country. Ambedkar as a studious and courageous child is also a favoured topic. Another theme is the external and unexpected force that helped determine the protagonist's destiny in a definitive manner: in 1907, when the young Ambedkar passed out of the Elphinstone High School, Mumbai, K.A. Keluskar, who was a teacher and writer, offered this young, exceptional student a copy of his version of Buddha's biography. Ambedkar himself (1980a: 27) narrates how much this book influenced him. His followers commemorate this event, as this was a harbinger of his conversion to Buddhism, his first awakening (Ahir 1990b: 21; Ramteke 1983: 93). The image of the scholar who lays down his life for his country

Fig. 6: The Buddha and Ambedkar as symbols of light, poster.

and community is another subject that is often described. Ambedkar is portrayed as seated at his desk, all by himself drawing up the Constitution of India.[2] Even Ambedkar's death is shrouded in mystery, typical of a hero. According to Sarkar (1994: 13-14) and Shastri (1989: 184) he was a victim of brahman conspiracy.

Other hagiographies describe Ambedkar as a 'modern Manu',[3] a 'great man' (*mahamanava*), a 'hero' (*mahanayaka*), a 'revolutionary' (Rajshekar 1985), a 'saviour' (Shastri 1993), a 'superman' (Sarkar 1994), a 'great humanitarian' (Ajnat 1992), a 'liberator' (Paul 1994) and a 'patriot' (Waghmare 1995: 237). Ambedkar is seen as a person who had extraordinary abilities: he was a scholar, gifted orator, leader, administrator and member of parliament. His list of honorary and academic titles, M.A., Ph.D., M.Sc., D.Sc., Barrister, LL.D., and his title Bharat Ratna is always commemorated (Sarkar 1994; Kadam 1991: 129-31). He is affectionately known as Babasaheb, Baba or Bhim. Eminent qualities attributed to him, include morality, omniscience, and leadership. Ambedkar was an involved and enlightened human being, brimming with wisdom, humanity and love for his fellowmen, who sacrificed his life for his people.

Here is an illustrative example. C.M. Wagh, a Buddhist and administrator of the Milind College at Aurangabad, pays homage to Ambedkar in a hymn entitled *Lord Bheema*.[4] In this, Ambedkar is venerated as a philosopher, comparable to the likes of Socrates, as an orator as great as Demosthenes, as an emancipator like Spartacus, as the founder of a new era like Lincoln and Lenin. Ambedkar is the enlightened lord, the bearer of truth, the forerunner of liberty, the apostle of justice, the voice of humanity, the angel of wisdom, the world's saviour, the sacred source of the future, life and light of the untouchables, the victorious general, the champion of human rights. This poem fits into the genre of the *strota* or hymn, a branch of devotional Indian literature, which will be discussed below.

Dalit poetry

In Dalit poetry, the *bauddha dhamma* is a recurring theme, but is often overlooked. For instance, according to Zelliot (1992a: 259) Buddhism is only marginally significant to this form of literature. The following few examples support the contrary view and show that Buddhism is pivotal to Dalit literature.

One of the most famous Dalit writers is Daya Pawar (1935-96).

He was born in a Mahar family that belonged to a village in the Ahmednagar district. He started working, for the Indian Railways in Mumbai, in 1957. From 1974 onwards, he published collections of verse. In 1978 his autobiography was published, which caught the attention of many people in India and the West. The government of Maharashtra awarded him a literary prize and the Ford Foundation, an important grant. The book was republished and translated into a number of languages, both Indian and Occidental.

Buddhism, in its various forms, is a central theme of Daya Pawar's writings. His poem about the *bodhi* tree[5] and the one on the Buddha are among the most beautiful and expressive. Pawar does not describe the meditating Buddha. He does not acknowledge the famous sculptures of the Buddha at the Ajanta and Ellora caves. He does not envision the Buddha in the lotus position, which, according to him, is the position of passive waiting and sleep. Pawar's Buddha was constantly on the move, walking and breathing, speaking to the poor and helping the weak. He goes from one hut to the next with a flaming torch in his hand, to dispel the shadows. He writes a new page of the *Tipitaka* and discovers a new significance for sufferance (*dukkha*). Given below is the English translation by Jayashree Gokhale (1993: 185):[6]

Siddhartha
Never do I see you
in the Jetawana[7]
sitting in the lotus position
with eyes closed
or in the caves of Ajanta or Werule[8]
with your stony lips touching
sleeping your final sleep.
I see you
speaking and walking
amongst the humble and the weak
soothing away grief
in the life-threatening darkness
with torch in hand
going from hovel to hovel
today you wrote a new page
of the *Tipitaka*
You have revealed a
new meaning of suffering

which like an epidemic
swallows life's blood.

Daya Pawar's poem is probably one of the most beautiful examples of Dalit literature. But it is not the only example. Manohar Jilthe, an English professor at the Milind College, Aurangabad, published a collection of Buddhist poems, titled *Parched Heart*. He dedicated a poem to *Sukhavati*[9] and paid obeisance to the Buddha and Milinda. The poem plays with the symbolism of the *bodhi* tree and the lotus pond. It also refers to the Buddhist concepts of *prajna*, *karuna*, and *maitri* (Jilthe 1992: 7. 31. 36. 44). Another Dalit writer, Bhagwan Sawai, composed two poems named *Tathagata* (Dangle 1992: 29-30). He describes how the image of the Buddha is his refuge from suffering, even though he does not observe the rituals of offering flowers or prayers to his images. He loathes all forms of worship and begs for forgiveness on behalf of the slave-like 'fetishists' who create idols and festivals in the Buddha's honour. He finally asks the Buddha to enter his body, to go from the darkness into the light.

The representation of the murderer Angulimala shows that the Dalit writers do not simply narrate stories that they take from the ancient texts, but that they use these stories and give them a new meaning. According to the legends quoted in the canonical texts, Angulimala was a thief of brahman origin who embraced Buddhism and attained *nirvana* while he was alive. This terrible man owed his notoriety to the chain he used to wear, which was made of the little fingers of his victims that he had cut off himself. Tryambak Sapkale wrote a poem named after this person.[10] He writes that he himself was scorned, condemned and humiliated by the higher castes and thus looked up to Sant Eknath for release. Disappointed by his indifference and arrogance, however, he dreamed of avenging himself. He imagined himself wearing a garland of the fingers of the people who had condemned him as he was an untouchable. Angulimala serves as a role model and his violent side is portrayed in a positive light. His laughter is supposed to have struck fear in the hearts of the higher castes and his cry, 'I am Angulimala' makes them tremble. So too in 'Siddhartha Nagar', Daya Pawar uses the image of Angulimala, but again, in a different manner. For him, the Buddha is the ultimate hero, not Angulimala. The Buddha makes Angulimala 'tremble' and 'makes him his humble disciple'.[11]

Dalit autobiographies

The autobiographical accounts could be classified as Dalit and Buddhist literature. Daya Pawar narrates in his famous autobiography *Balute*, how his family became Buddhist and abandoned the worship of Hindu deities. Given below is a passage from Jean-Luc Profit's and Madhuri Purandhare's translation:

In 1956, Babasaheb converted thousands of his followers to Buddhism. I could not take part in this historical event. But this revolutionary event affected one family after another. Some destroyed the deities that festooned the walls of their houses; others got rid off the idols like so many worthless stones. They scorned pilgrimages and traditional divinities like Mariai,[12] Mashoba[13] and Khandoba.[14] They stopped the sacrifice of goats and chickens. We still have an altar at home, as a souvenir. Mother had me make silver plaques of Khandoba and Bahiroba.[15] She kept them in a corner, mainly because they were made of silver. When I tidy up nowadays and come across these plaques, I do not know what to do with them. Nobody bathes the idols or performs *puja* anymore. (Pawar 1996: 193)

Baby Kamble, a greengrocer and farmer from Phaltan, a town in the district of Pune, wrote one of the first female Dalit autobiographies of Maharashtra. Though she did not have the opportunity to continue at school, she wrote poetry. She read the works of Phule and Ambedkar and decided to write her autobiography. In 1983, the first complete edition appeared in the form of articles in a periodical for women. The complete work was published in Pune in 1986. Given below are a few passages translated by Guy Poitevin and Hema Raikar. These describe Ambedkar's role for the Mahars and how it changed their destiny:

Just as Gautama became the Buddha through focussing his mind, Bhim became enlightened through the persistent use of knowledge. . . . Bhimsun, the universe belongs to you. Bhim created us. It is thanks to his sacrifices that our existence shines like gold. Baba, the prince who renounced a lot, offered himself to the Dalits and the oppressed in oblation and then exited this life. . . . Baba stayed as the moon and the sun. His voice is immortal. He gave up his life for others. . . . Bhim gave us our independence. . . . He is superior to the creator of the world. Bhim accomplished what the father of the gods failed to. . . . We were only mere skeletons with lack-lustre eyes, sunken in their sockets. However, Bhim's flame kindled these inanimate skeletons and the brilliance of this flame made us speak. His light penetrated our heads, our eyes and our ears to hear. We became human beings. . . . During this struggle, Bhim endowed us with three jewels. The

first is dignity, the second education and the third, the return to the mother [India] along with the Buddha's religion. What more could a father give to his children?. . . It is thanks to his dedication that we enjoy our state of well being today. (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 257-64)

Baby Kamble's account reveals a true devotion to Ambedkar, who is 'superior to the creator', 'the father of happiness' and the person responsible for the radical change of the Mahar's life. Thanks to him, 'the Mahar retrieved their souls when the situation radically changed for the better' (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 162). The Mahar people achieved a new way of living through education and by changing their profession. They became 'Bhim's soldiers' as they considered themselves his disciples. The vocabulary used is of interest since it refers to royalty and sovereignty. Ambedkar is their 'king', their 'god' (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 163). Ambedkar is compared to, even identified with, the Buddha for his exceptional qualities. He is also the prince who renounces the material world and gives his disciples the three jewels. Baby Kamble plays with the double meaning of the expression 'the three jewels' which refers to the Three Refuges of traditional Buddhism: the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*.

Mentioned here as well is Shantibai Kamble's account. She was born in 1923 and belongs to the Mahar caste. She grew up in her native village. In 1942, she became the first untouchable woman to become a teacher in the district of Solapur. After a teachers' training course, she reached the zenith of her career in 1980 when she was nominated to the post of inspector of schools. She had forty-three primary schools under her. After she retired and settled down to family life, she published her memoirs, which appeared in Bombay, in 1986. This is what she wrote on the subject of conversion to Buddhism:

In 1957, the untouchable people, who lived in the seven villages surrounding Kargani, decided to convert. In order to follow the Buddha's religion, we appointed a Buddhist monk and Bhandare, the leader of our caste. . . . The day we were to convert finally arrived. We had the invitations printed and we distributed them among the villages. Everybody came, everybody from Bombay and Kargani. . . . Everyone, men, women and children were dressed in new clothes. The Buddhist monk lived and ate his meals at our house. At three o' clock in the afternoon, everybody gathered in the *maharvada*. We had made cloth flags, one of which bore the message, 'If you want to be a human being, convert'. At around four o' clock, our brothers and sisters

moved in a solemn procession. We shouted slogans all along the way. Some of them went like: 'Long live Ambedkar, glory to Lord Gautama Buddha'. The procession set off from the Mahar locality, went around the village and ended in front of the tent, where the ceremony was to take place. All the brothers and sisters seated themselves quietly in the tent. Soon after, the Buddhist monk adorned the portraits of Gautama Buddha, Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar with garlands of flowers. Incense sticks and candles were lit. Everyone recited the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. The Buddhist monk then welcomed all the brothers and sisters to the Buddhist *dharma*. . . . On that day, a meal was offered to the people of the area and of the village. Everybody shared their joy. Everyone decided that from that day onwards, no one would collect carcasses or fulfil any mean services. They would not announce the news of death in other villages either. (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 114-15)

This account reveals the different aspects of Buddhist conversion. First of all, it tells us how the conversion ceremonies took place after Ambedkar's death, in other words, how this movement took root in the villages and cities of Maharashtra. The fact that the ceremony is not spectacular is of some interest. The portraits of Ambedkar, the Buddha and Mahatma Phule are garlanded. The Buddhist rituals texts like the Three Refuges, are recited. The decision to convert is taken by a group of Mahar people, who come from different villages. Thus this is a collective act, which has, as its goal, a new commitment. The Mahars decide never to do any traditional tasks that are reserved for the untouchable castes. According to this account, the motivation to convert is social discrimination and the need to improve the life-style. Shantabai Kamble does not refer to a different reality or a transcendental dimension. This is a social act, looked upon as joyous and liberating.

The press

When I use the term 'press', it signifies all the periodicals published and the organizations to which they belong. The little books and booklets that appear every year during the big Buddhist festivals like Ambedkar's birth anniversary and the day he converted to Buddhism are an area of special interest. Ambedkar's work and life are commemorated and discussed in these publications, as well as Buddhism and the Dalit situation. A typical publication compiles the annually published journals of various educational institutions like the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar College at Mahad, the Siddharth

College of Arts, Science and Commerce in Mumbai and the Milind College of Arts in Aurangabad. The best students are honoured in these publications and poems dedicated to Ambedkar by the students are also printed. A number of Ambedkarite associations publish similar booklets. Some of the associations are: the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute, Mumbai, the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Hospital Trust, Solapur and the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Jnanvikas Kendra, Nashik. The names of members of these associations along with their photographs and donations are sometimes published. Important events of the year, a few general articles about Buddhism and Ambedkar written by local key figures are often included. These two types of publications are distributed free of charge or at a reasonable price so as to reach a large number of people. Local companies, banks, and shops sponsor such publication with advertisements, in them. This form of 'souvenir literature' is not unique to the Buddhists, but is widely practised in India.

Periodicals constitute another significant part of the Buddhist press, in terms of sheer volume, profile, and quality. Some of them are distributed at the local level. Others are published in Delhi, Bangalore, and other Indian cities and distributed nationally and thus have reached the state of Maharashtra. However, it is difficult to ascertain how widely circulated they are. The Marathi periodicals, *Dhamma Sampada* and *Masika Bauddhamitra Samdesha*, are published from Aurangabad and Nagpur. The bilingual (English and Hindi) monthly, *Yuga Udbodhana*, is published from Delhi.

The Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, a Buddhist organization, which will be discussed in detail below publishes the review *Dhammamegha* in English containing Sangarakshita's articles and speeches. Since 1978, a second monthly periodical, *Buddhayana*, is published in Marathi by the same association. It carries information on the latest events of community life, meditation, new members and the association's activities. This publication's target readership is the local Maharashtrian public.

As for publications dealing with feminist and activist issues, *Amhi Maitarani* is published in Marathi by Meenakshi Moon. In 1995, U.K. Jadhav, a retired Buddhist Mahar, published a few issues of an English periodical, *Dr. Ambedkarism*. This was short-lived. The review *Prabuddha Bharata*, which is the RPI's mouthpiece, appears irregularly. In brief, one must not overestimate either the number of periodicals in circulation or their influence. One must not presume

either that the Buddhist community reads a lot more than the other castes. In fact, the sheer number and diversity of the periodicals reveals the need to express oneself and the multiplicity of opinions that exist at the heart of the Buddhist movement.

Popular music

Music and songs are another means of religious communication used to honour Ambedkar and the Buddha (Zelliot 1984: 107-8 and 1992: 257-60). It would not be an exaggeration to say that these songs are very well known. Every year, poets release cassettes and booklets of their new songs. It is easy to obtain them during the festivals. The themes usually include Ambedkar and the liberation of the untouchables, the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. As for the music, it is based on popular songs as well as the latest Hindi movie hits. There are a number of studios that look after the recording and the distribution as for instance, the Kavi Music House in Mumbai. Most of these recordings produce not just Buddhist music but also other contemporary music and Hindu hymns. As a matter of fact, the devotional music market in India is huge. Cassettes are available everywhere, in shops, homes, temples (Marcus 1997). On analysis, one finds that the Buddhist songs are similar to the traditional Hindu *bhajanas*, group recitation of one or many hymns, a form of worship (Fuller 1992: 158; Bernsten and Zelliot 1992: xvii).

Here is a hymn dedicated to Ambedkar, *Ramji Sutana* (the son of Ramji), composed by Bhimrao Pavar. This poem refers to Ramji Sakpal's son Bhim:

> Son of Ramji[16]
>
> The son of Ramji, our Bhim
> saved the humiliated, weak and suffering people.
> He destroyed the system of the four *varnas*.
>
> Bhim burnt the yoke of slavery.
> He protested against injustice and won the fight.
> Having suffered under the ancient customs,
> he got rid of them.
>
> Discrimination revolted Bhim.
> All by himself, he helped us back on our feet.
> During difficult times
> Rao raised his fist in protest against injustice.

'I will not die a Hindu'[17]
this desire is going to become a reality, decided Bhim.
He prostrated himself at the Buddha's feet
and converted to Buddhism.

This song is not only an eulogy but also a hymn that retraces the important landmarks of Ambedkar's fight for justice. In the chorus he is described as a liberator of his people as well as a reformer. It is he who eradicated the four varnas. In the first stanza, his revolutionary stand is brought to the fore. The phrase 'he burnt the yoke of slavery' refers to the *satyagraha* at Mahad in 1927, where he burnt the *Manusmriti*. It goes even further. Through the use of belligerent vocabulary, he is represented as a revolutionary. For example, 'he protested against injustice', 'won the fight'. The second stanza reveals the importance of Ambedkar's role in history.

To his community, he was the driving force, who motivated the masses to rebel against the system in order to win equal rights. Revolution was Ambedkar's vehicle to bring about change. This reaches a crescendo in the last stanza. It is no longer about being acquiescent or about engaging in a verbal battle but about being as deeply involved as the depth of one's convictions: to convert oneself. In the last stanza, Bhimrao Pavar, who has the same first name as Ambedkar, uses it as an equivalent. This custom is largely prevalent in poetry, especially among *bhakti* poets.

From the devotional songs dedicated to Ambedkar, we now look at those dedicated to the Buddha. Through their language and vocabulary, the songs come across as more ritualistic. Given below is the *Vandana Gita*,[18] by the poet S. Savarde, dedicated to the Buddha:

Vandana Gita

Accept my prayer, o Gautama!
I prostrate myself three times before you!

Treasure trove of knowledge and ocean of awareness,
do not lose them!

Celebrate life
in the light of the Buddha's full moon!

He renounced his royal riches
and chose the path of peace.

He gave us wisdom [19]
compassion and morality!

I'm inspired,
I meditate on this great man.
Pardon the brother Savarde!

In this song, Sarvade addresses himself to everyone and asks each one to prostrate himself before the supreme guide, this virtuous man who was the Buddha. To accomplish this, he wrote this text in the form of a hymn and made reference to the ancient Buddhist symbols like the three virtues, wisdom, compassion, and morality. This text describes the Buddha as the guardian, 'the cultivator' of knowledge and above all as the only guide who would lead the people to a better place. He is described as the bearer of human hope.

Vishnu Shinde is another Buddhist poet. He uses the same principle to pay homage to Ambedkar:

Vandana Gita[20]

Chorus:
Let's prostrate ourselves at the feet of the Buddha and Bhim,
let's sing the Five Precepts and Three Refuges!

Today, thousands of people
have come to express their joy.
They followed their hearts.

Let's wear our immaculately white clothes again,
and commemorate with a clear and revived mind Baba's wisdom!
Let's follow the Buddha's path[21] during our lives,
look at the Buddhists the world over!
Let's always honour Bhim's works,
let's keep his deeds in mind!
Vishnu's life has become happy.
Let's always stay enlightened!

Shinde and Sarvade call upon the people to prostrate themselves before the Buddha and Dr Ambedkar and to recite the Five Precepts and the Three Refuges. The semantic content of these *vandana gitas* is ritual devotion. It is important to mention here that Shinde stresses

on the wearing of new, white, clothes. White clothes are considered noble and pure and represent Buddhist attire that is usually worn during important festivals. Shinde's hymn recommends to everyone that Ambedkar must be honoured. The poet also reminds Buddhists all over the world that to be Buddhist has a universal connotation and transcends all barriers. He feels close to all Buddhists, irrespective of their country of origin.

Given below is another song, written by Dhondiram, to commemorate Ambedkar's birth anniversary.

Song for his birth anniversary[22]

O Bhimrao, your birthday is enriched by equality!
O Bhimrao, your birthday is enriched by love!

O Bhim, you planted the tree
which provides shade in the heat of summer.
You will show the *dhamma* of the Buddha's wisdom to the humble town.
Since, it has become radiant and bustles with activity.
your glory resides in each house.

Through messengers, Bhim's teachings reached
all the cardinal points.
No festival is as grand as your birthday.

Jaya Bhima,[23] these words are so dear, they are invaluable.
They bring peace to the mind.

The poets, both young and old, gather to sing
about Bhim's supreme qualities.
Today, they praise him by singing the Five Precepts.
Dhodiram sings out aloud and in everybody's presence.
After all, why would you want to sing all by yourself?

This poem explains the enthusiasm with which the Buddhists celebrate Ambedkar's birth anniversary. They express their gratitude to Bhimrao. Thanks to his struggle, they were freed from slavery. Ambedkar is hailed as a hero, almost like a god.

A number of these poems have been sung and written by women, one of them was Sitabai Thakur. Thanks to the publication of her autobiography by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pavar (1989: 197-8), a few details about her life are known. Her father was a musician and religious singer. She lived with her parents and sang traditional

bhajanas. After she converted to Buddhism and having met Ambedkar in person, she started to sing Buddhist songs. Illiterate, she decided to learn to read and write so that she could compose her songs herself. Her first composition was a *vandana* for Baba-saheb. After her father passed away, she sang alone. She organized a number of associations of Buddhist women. She went to Bombay, where she sang at Chembur, Andheri, and Kamathipura. Since 1974, she has been singing at the Buddhist temple in Worli. Given below are two devotional songs collected by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pavar (1989: 198-9):

> Come all! Let's sing the *vandana* to the son of Ramji!
> During the Mahad *satyagraha*
> he made us drink the delicious water
> breaking all restrictions!

The other is noticed for its pronounced Buddhist symbolism:

> Bhim sits under the *pippala* tree.[24]
> Baba sees the Buddha, the god.
> He goes around India, the *dhammacakra* in his hand.
> He convinces the people to accept the new *dharma*.
> He sees the Buddha, the god.

The metaphor 'god' (*deva*), used in the poems, is what strikes the reader the most since it contradicts the strong atheism of Babasaheb. The other subjects are already well known: the *bodhi* tree, the *dhamma*, the wheel of *dhamma*, equality, liberty, and the Mahad *satyagraha*. These subjects possess a semantic structure that is almost canonical and representative of all these poems. There are, however, a number of combinations possible. New variants appear regularly.

The songs of the millstone

The texts that were discussed earlier more or less dealt with urban Buddhists. A type of literature that is rural, oral, and feminine ought to be presented to complete my analysis. This form of literature includes the songs of the millstone that are sung by the women of the village who grind grain every morning. Poitevin (1997: 7-9) describes in minute detail how the women seat themselves on the ground and arduously work the millstone. The movement of the

women and the rotation of the millstone are synchronous. They also sing in time to the rhythm of the millstone. The songs are actually poems in the form of *ovi*, which is a very popular Maharashtrian poetic metre (Guru 1997b: 25-9; Poitevin 1997: 27; Tulpule 1979: 451). The stanzas comprise two rhyming and rhythmic lines. The rules of composing these poems are liberal thus allowing great freedom of expression. The order of the lines and the choice of stanzas depend upon the words, the rhymes, and the associations that the composer makes. In these songs the women describe their lives, praise the gods, narrate myths, express their devotion, and mention contemporary events. These songs are not abstract creations but describe the experiences, ideas, and opinions of the women. They also express interpersonal relationships. The women hope to forge bonds with the other women on an emotional level (Poitevin 1997: 280-1).

The songs of the Buddhist women are of interest. I noticed that the life of Ambedkar is a recurring theme and this 'sung biography' has hagiographic characteristics. Ambedkar represented a model life to them. There are 'factual' historical details, but Ambedkar has been described in metaphorical terms, like a king (*maharaja*), a king of the Dalits (*dalitaca raja*), and a jewel (*hira*) born to a Dalit family. Baba is an extraordinary man because he pursued higher studies, went abroad, wore shoes made in England, and a coat. He rode on a motorbike, in a car, and travelled even in an airplane! He left his native village and moved to the Indian capital. Nevertheless, he did not forget his people and stayed in touch with them. He kept abreast through the newspapers and the letters that he received while he was in Delhi. He accomplished a lot in order to liberate his people: he went to court, drafted the Constitution, abandoned the Mahar custom of the fifty-two traditional rights, and sent the children to school.

Ambedkar's two wives play an important role in these songs. His first wife, Ramabai, a woman who was originally Mahar, drew more attention. Buddhist women easily identify with her. She is described as a devoted wife who loved and admired her husband, who was anxious in his absence, while he travelled and who received jewellery that her husband bought abroad. She offered him all the devotion of a wife and stayed awake while he slept. Her clothes and jewellery, as well as his, were all made of precious materials, like

gold, silver and silk. Ambedkar's second wife, Savita Ambedkar, was accused of having killed her husband by poisoning him. Given below are a few songs:[25]

> My first song is for the Lord Buddha,
> He gave the *dhamma* for the welfare of the Dalits.
>
> Listen, listen to Baba Bhimrao's message,
> the Buddhist *dhamma* is the world's future.
>
> My third song pays homage to the *dhamma*,
> the great Buddhist *dhamma* will save the world.
>
> I offer my fourth song to the sangha,
> I will follow the principles layed down by the Five Precepts.
>
> This is my fifth song. Let us recite the Five Precepts,
> I took refuge in the Buddha, I accepted Bhim's name.

In these songs, the women sing about how Bhim converted the Mahars into Buddhists. It is a must to give up the old practices and create a new society. The Buddha gave the *dhamma* to liberate the Dalits. Chanting the Buddha's name is akin to freedom. His name dispels fatigue and sufferance and replaces them with happiness (*ananda*). His name is like ambrosia or nectar. Sometimes the women make use of universal expressions like the *dhamma* of the Buddha will save the world. In these songs, the Buddha and Ambedkar appear to be objects of ritual veneration (*arati*) and worship (*puja*). Dressed in white, the women light candles, pray (*prarthana*) and take vows (*vrata*) in front of their hero. They also celebrate their birthdays. The language used here is similar to the language of the poems, autobiographies, and hagiographies men-tioned above. The same themes are covered, those of light and the contrast between white and black.

The metaphors that are used often refer to Hindu mythology. Even though Ambedkar had published his books, his writings are called *pothi*, a term that signifies usually manuscripts written on palm leaves.[26] Ambedkar is known as Bhima, the Pandava, because of his first name. He is even looked upon as his reincarnation (*bhimaca avatara*). Ambedkar is portrayed as using a chariot, an image that reminds one of Rama as well as the war-like Maratha past. The Buddha is described in divine terms *gautama deva* as in Hinduism. The ritual terminology is the same. The statue of the Buddha is

called *murti* and the Buddhist temple is called *mandira*. In the past, the Mahar women sang devotional songs to Hindu gods. The new songs have been reworked and innovated upon, using the ancient tradition as a guide without really breaking with it. The women sing the songs of their new heroes, Ambedkar and the Buddha. The language and the lexical field do not change much. These songs are essentially hymns that are religious in nature. As a result, we understand why certain stanzas attribute a feminine character to Ambedkar and address him as 'Mother Bhim' (*bhimai*). This term is used to address the goddess.[27]

These songs are genuinely Buddhist. They represent the words of the women sung in unison and are an expression of peasant piety. In a city like Pune, women no longer grind grain themselves. They buy readymade flour. These songs are looked upon as 'naïve' and carry far too many references to the traditional Hindu religion. However, they are well known in the cities even though they are no longer sung. Many of the urban Buddhists who live in the cities of Pune or Mumbai today, come from a rural background or have family who still lives in the village. If one were to read these songs attentively, the recurrent message is the same history of liberation and emancipation of the untouchables.

Theatre

In Maharashtra, the popular theatre has had a rich and interesting history. In the villages the Mahars and the Matangs were the traditional musicians, actors and singers of *tamasha*, which is a mélange of sentimental piety and rustic eroticism, dance, singing and poetry. In the past, it was looked down upon because it lacked sophistication. Through this form of theatre, a number of movements could voice their messages and political parties used it to mobilize the masses. Many Buddhist associations resorted to this form of communication to awaken the conscience of their community and to propagate Buddhism (Guru 1997b: 9, 11, 13-17). Each *jalasa*, which is a specific form of *tamasha*, has the same structure. It consists of music and dance. The elements are controlled, for example, there is always an activist and supporter of Ambedkar and his adversaries, a bad leader of the community, an old man or an old woman. The action unfolds between the two parties where the objective is to convince the adversary. While the play continues,

the adversaries gradually become fervent supporters of Ambedkar.

This form of theatre exists even today. In 1984, the first national meeting of the Dalit theatre, the All India Dalit Drama Convention, presided over by B.S. Shinde, took place in Pune. Shinde reminded the people how the Dalit theatre was an important and effective means to educate the masses. He was a renowned playwright. In 1979, he wrote *In the Heart of Darkness*, which is a description of atrocities, social boycott, and discrimination against the untouchables of a village (Joshi 1986: 93-7). Ramnath Cavhan reiterated during the 7th All India Dalit Drama Convention, in Nashik in 1992, that the Dalit theatre (*dalita rangamanca*) is 'a theatre for social protest . . . which was inspired by Phule and Doctor Ambedkar and whose common ambition is the eradication of the caste system'.[28]

Buddhism is an important theme to Dalit theatre. Here is the synopsis of a story, *Conversion*, written by Bhimrao Kardak.[29] In the first act of the play, whose story takes place just after the time Ambedkar has declared to give up Hinduism, Bhimrao, a social activist, tries to spread Buddhism among the masses. In a village, he comes upon an old woman who would rather keep her Hindu gods. She was born a Hindu and still cherished the order of the four varnas. According to her, Hinduism is the most perfect *dharma* (*sarvashreshtha dharma*). However, Bhimrao explains to her that Hinduism is not a *dharma* but hell (*naraka*). The only solution would be to abandon the worship of Hindu gods and embrace Buddhism, which, he assures her, respects the individual and the equality of men. Bhimrao adds that the untouchables cannot enter Hindu temples and that the measures taken by the government to allow the untouchables access to the public wells did not really change anything. Finally, Bhimrao manages to change the old woman's opinion and everybody decides to follow Ambedkar's decision, without which the untouchables would continue to eat rice instead of sweets. The old woman agrees with him and decides to follow Baba and never worship the Hindu gods ever again.

THEMES AND STRUCTURES OF THE BUDDHIST DISCOURSE

Let us now shift to another level of analysis, to the kind of 'typical' discourse that is practised by different Buddhist groups in Maharashtra. I will show that there exist a number of variants, but in

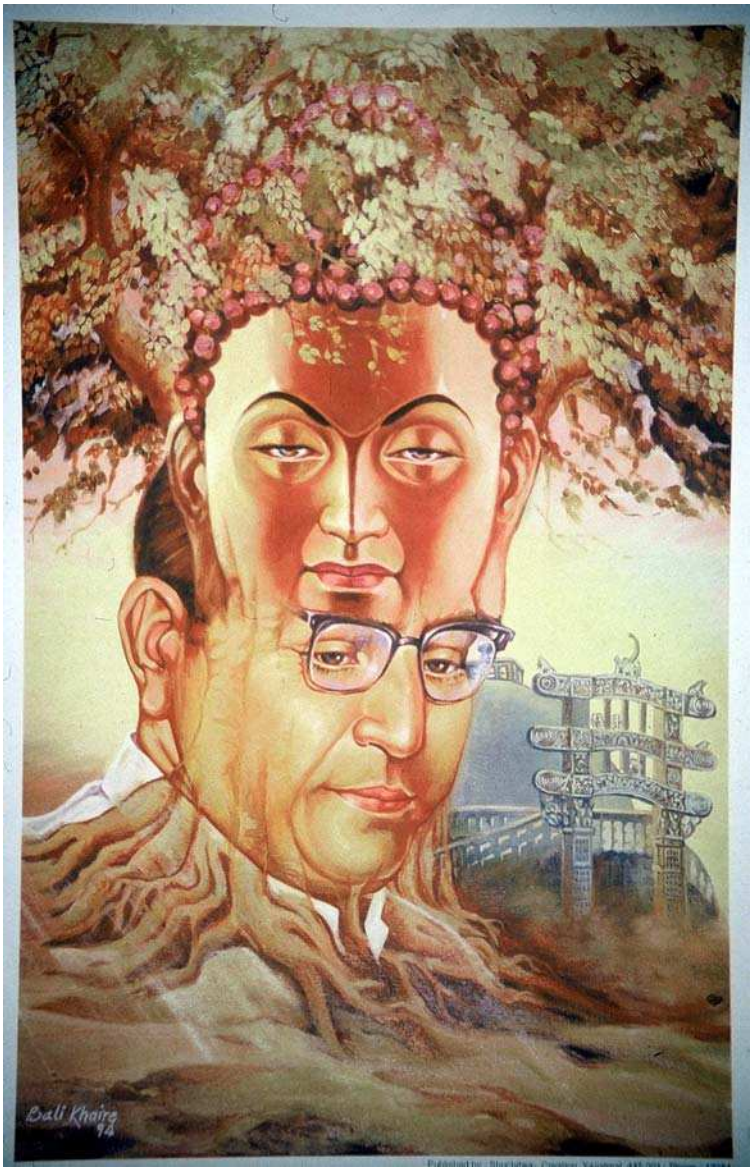

Fig. 7: The *bodhi tree*, poster.

order to be able to understand these variants, one will have to reconstruct how Buddhism is perceived in general. Which are its most important elements?

Conversion to Buddhism

The Buddhists when asked about their conversion do not respond in an abstract manner. They describe their untouchability and suffering before they converted. It is crucial to note here that the candalas mentioned in the *Dharmashastras* as are seen as the ancestors of the Mahars. Meenakshi Moon narrates:

> Before the conversion we were Hindu Mahars. While we belonged to the untouchable class, we were disallowed access to the wells and taps. We were not allowed to enter the temple either. Even at school, we were served water from a distance. Wherever we went, the first thing people asked us was which caste we belonged to. As soon as they learnt about our caste, all communication ceased because we were untouchables.

Conversion to Buddhism brought about a change in the status quo. Meenakshi Moon wrotes that she no longer felt Mahar or like an untouchable but in fact, Buddhist: 'Formerly, we were Mahars. We are Buddhists now. We find the caste system (*jata pata*) intolerable. Inequality (*visamata*) has disappeared. I believe in what Baba said about self-respect (*svabhimana*) and each individual's personal progress.'

In the same way, a Buddhist employee at the University of Pune, who is 33 years old, married and father of two children and who lives in Khadki, narrates:

> I believe that becoming Buddhist has a number of advantages. I can live outside the caste system. I managed to overcome my inferiority complex. I no longer think about belonging to an inferior caste. I esteem myself more and I am more self-confident. Society no longer looks upon me as an 'untouchable'. I am free from all restrictions. I am free to live as a human being. However, at the university, where I work, the high caste people look down upon the Buddhists. We are given much more work as compared to the others. . . . I am proud to be Buddhist. Buddhism is spread far and wide all over the world. In India, it occupies an important place. I am proud to have embraced this superior religion. This *dharma* does not make any distinction between men and teaches us to lead a pure life.

Conversion to Buddhism signifies a collective reorientation towards

ridding society of all forms of discrimination and the obtaining of an equal status, which would lead to the abolition of slavery. The interview goes to show that the behaviour of the high castes towards the Buddhist converts has not really changed. Though they do not accept them as equals and continue to look down upon them even as converts, the converts are proud and happy about their decision. Here is another passage from the interview with Meenakshi Moon:

Doctor Ambedkar initiated my parents and me into Buddhism on 14th October 1956, in Nagpur. I gave up Hinduism and accepted the Twenty-two Vows and the Pancashila. Formerly, according to Hinduism, we were untouchable Mahars and we had suffered tremendously due to the discriminating practices. I was very happy to give Hinduism up, a religion that advocated the caste system (*jatibheda*) and abused us. I embraced Buddhism because it is a religion that believes in equality (*samata*) and independence (*svatantrta*) and shuns the caste system . . . When we were Mahars, people would insult us for the sins we had committed in our previous lives. They have stopped now. We have overcome our inferiority complex. We were Mahars before, in other words we were the untouchables (*asprshya*), the unworthy. Today, as Buddhists, we have our independence. This is the end of slavery (*gulama*). Buddhism has shown us the path to progress. Baba offered us this important piece of advice, 'Educate yourselves, get organized, and fight' (*shika, sanghaita vha, sangharsha kara*!). We concentrated on cleanliness and education for our children and ourselves. We respect ourselves. Thanks to Babasaheb Ambedkar, we attained independence (*svatantrta*), equality, brotherhood (*bandhutva*) and justice (*nyaya*). Ambedkar is our exemplary model (*adarsha*). . . . There was tremendous progress in the fields of religion, literature and politics.

What struck me most in this interview was Meenakshi Moon's observation that the superior castes' derision has not really disappeared. But this is not as important as the shedding of all feelings of inferiority complexes and the renunciation of the ancient gods. Meenakshi Moon says:

The religion we practised was Hinduism (*hindu dharma*). We had to worship 330 million Hindu gods. There were vows and festivals. We have renounced all the gods (*deva*) and embraced Buddhism (*bauddha dhamma*), which is based on intelligence (*buddhi*). The greatest advantage of conversion is the giving up of all the gods. We no longer believe in god (*ishvara*) or blind faiths (*andhashraddha*). We only do what we believe is right.

Seetabai Thakur, a singer at the Worli temple, narrates:

When we lived in Satara, my father threw the pictures of gods, the idols

(*devace photo va murtya*) and the religious books into the river . . . We have changed our religion. We decided to give up all that is ancient. Consequently, we renounced the gods. For instance, when my father passed away, I organized a simple memorial service (*shokasabha*). We have belonged to a Lakshmi temple for four generations now. It is located close to where we live. We used to regularly worship the goddess and pray to her. After the conversion, I covered the goddess with a sheet. I no longer worship the goddess. (Moon and Pavar 1989: 199)

However, everything is not as it seems. Sukhadeo Thorat (1993: 71) describes how the abandoning of Hindu idols created significant tensions among the Buddhists, especially between the generations, between the grandparents and their grandchildren. The views on religious practices are also varied. In the discussion on Buddhist ritual practices, I will show that this abandoning of Hinduism is not as radical as Meenakshi Moon and Seetabai Thakur claim. When one conducts a personal interview and tries to verify facts, one realizes that the actual situation is more complex.

Women's liberation

One of the central themes of the Buddhist discourse is the emancipation of women. True, this discourse dates back to the nineteenth century and is common to a number of reform movements across various religious denominations. Preventing widow remarriage and the patriarchate have been widely criticized as forms of exploitation, discrimination, and intolerable subjugation (Phule 1991b: 117-18; Chakravarti 1998; Sunthankar 1993: 191-5 and 303-10; Narasu 1993: 89-96). Ambedkar was aware of the problem. In 1952, he published an article in the *Journal of the Maha Bodhi Society of India*, blaming Brahmanism for the oppression of women in India. The reason for the degradation of the status of women is the *Manusmriti,* which served as the conduit of this patriarchal and chauvinist ideology. Concerning the rivalry between Brahmanism and Buddhism, the oppression of women was a reaction to the Buddha's views. Brahmans introduced rigid rules in order to keep women under the subjugation of men so that they would not join the Buddha, who looked on them as equals, allowing them to be a part of the *sangha* (Ambedkar 1995: 170).

The same involvement for the feminine cause characterizes the contemporary Buddhist and Dalit doctrines. It also corresponds to

the active participation of women in this movement. A collection of interviews of Buddhist women by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pavar underlines this fact. The songs of the millstone and the autobiographies of Shantabai Dani (1990), Shantabai Kamble (1991) and Baby Kamble mentioned above are important female contributions. Jyoti Lanjewar (1995) and Kumud Pawade (1992, 1995) are other examples of women writers who claimed equal rights and revolted against exploitation. Zelliot (1992b: 92-3) is therefore correct when she stresses that Buddhist women no longer advocate the ancient tradition, as the stereotypical Hindu woman would.

How is the emancipation of women and the conversion dealt with? Let us take an example: Hira Bansode, born in 1941, married and mother of an adopted son, works for the Railways in Mumbai. She is a renowned Dalit poet.[30] She wrote a poem about Yashodhara, the Buddha's wife (Dangle 1992: 32), to draw attention to the condition of Buddhist women who are often forgotten or overlooked. Hira Bansode wonders why this woman is not represented in any of the Buddhist *viharas* (temples) and why she is not accorded the respect she deserves. She puts herself in Yashodhara's place and wonders how she must have felt when her husband decided to leave her. However, the emancipation of women is not only a literary theme. It is an integral part of the views on Buddhist conversion. Meenakshi Moon confides:

> By converting to Buddhism, the women obtained the same rights (*samana hakka*) as men. In the Hindu religion, the woman has no rights. Thanks to the *Hindu Code Bill*, Baba threw open the portals of progress to women. It gave them the right to divorce and to inherit, and disallowed polygamy. . . . Thanks to Buddhism we can lead an honourable life. Through education, we know about the world and about Buddhism. Through education, we found ourselves good jobs. All the progress that we have made is a result of our conversion to Buddhism. Nowadays, girls can become doctors, engineers and teachers. They have the same opportunities as boys.

The *Hindu Code Bill* was a law meticulously drafted by Ambedkar to promote the emancipation of women and the equality of the sexes. It guaranteed women the right to divorce their husbands and the right to inherit property, irrespective of different religious customs. But this law was never voted upon. Frustrated by his defeat, Ambedkar resigned from Nehru's cabinet in 1951.[31] Meenakshi Moon's account seems schematic: all social progress is attributed to Ambedkar and to conversion to Buddhism. It is explained by the

category and context of the quote, which is about conversion. Moon presents her view of the world and reality according to her. The structure of this discourse is always the same: in the beginning the situation is a problematic one, conversion is the solution and as a result the situation changes for the better.

Doctor Ambedkar: a Buddhist hero

It is evident that Ambedkar is the symbol of the new Buddhist identity. He comes across as a liberator and saviour. Some even look upon him as a divine being (*devata*). Dr Harish Ahire explains the anger he felt at the defacement of Ambedkar's statue in 1997, in Ramabai Nagar: 'Dr. Ambedkar is our god. How can we tolerate our god being insulted? Would you tolerate Rama, another god or another person whom you respected being ill-treated? Baba helped us leave hell (*naraka*). He gave us back our self-respect (*svabhimana*)' (Kolhe and Thombre 1998: 152). Others who were interviewed said that they respected Ambedkar more than any other human being on this planet: 'You see, Doctor Ambedkar is like a father. Or more than a father. If somebody were to insult the memory of a member of my family, I would take it very seriously. I would become very angry. But if someone were to insult Doctor Ambedkar, I would kill that person. Of that I can assure you.' They speak of Ambedkar enthusiastically. He personifies all the norms, ideal virtues and the fundamental values of Buddhism. His death in 1956 is considered an irreparable loss. A Buddhist in Mumbai talks about his grief, 'Babasaheb left us far too early. After his death, there was no one to guide us. He left us alone, without direction.'

As mentioned earlier, Doctor Ambedkar is regarded as a *bodhisattva* (Bhadra Thera 1993; Pilchick 1988: 91-2). Some people believe that his birthday relates to 14 April 623 BC, which is supposed to be the day on which the Buddha was born. Still others believe that he is the long-awaited *bodhisattva,* according to an ancient prophecy, who will save the people from suffering at the end of the *kaliyuga*. This reminds us of a Hindu saviour rather than a *bodhisattva*. Given here is Ahir's (1990a) explanation about why Ambedkar should be considered a *bodhisattva*. Referring to the traditional vows,[32] he claims that Ambedkar should be seen as someone who will save the people, rid them of all their desires, teach them the truth, and lead

them to *nirvana*. He would have fulfilled the necessary conditions in order to attain enlightenment and would possess the characteristic qualities (*paramita*) of a *bodhisattva.* Ambedkar resembles a saint who abstains from earthly pleasures in order to liberate the suffering masses. According to Ahir (1990a: 37), Ambedkar would have completed Buddha's teachings.

The issue that now arises is the importance of the Buddha. His most important characteristics are his quest to eliminate human suffering as well as his incontestable historical character. A Buddhist from Pune who is 45 years old, married, and father of two, says:

> The Buddha's real name is Siddhartha. He is a great name in history. He is not a god (*deva*). The way of life as led by Siddhartha, later called the Buddha, is social and not religious. Consequently, Buddhism should not be viewed as a *dharma* or as a blind faith (*andhashraddha*). The Buddha said that the elimination of human suffering (*duhkha*) is paramount. It is important to life. The Buddha must be seen as a revolutionary, an ideal and perfect man. Due to his superior qualities, he is the ideal leader (*neta*) of a society. The Buddha's thought should pervade our daily life. If we were to put this into practice in our society, all our problems would be solved. Every one should practise the Buddha's principles in their personal and professional lives. That would bring us happiness. Buddhism accords importance to social interests.

The Buddha appears to be a perfect man, a revolutionary and a social reformer. He is a leader with ideal traits. This interview is interesting but not representative, because Ambedkar is generally seen as more important than the Buddha. When a Buddhist is questioned about his conversion, his *raison d'être* and the way he sees the world, he will always mention Ambedkar by adding a sentence, an expression or a long description to underline his admiration for his hero. In contrast the Buddha is sometimes not even mentioned or the examples are only allusive in nature. In order to confirm this hypothesis, one need only compare the number of poems, songs and hymns dedicated to Ambedkar to those dedicated to the Buddha. Moreover, it is rare to come across a Buddhist house without a picture of Ambedkar while houses without a picture of the Buddha are many. It is also significant to note that the Buddhist festival calendar is based on the events of Ambedkar's life. In brief, the diminished importance of Buddha constitutes one of the main differences between the Dalits and other Buddhist communities.

Key concepts

What are the most important elements that constitute the semantic field of the expression *bauddha dhamma* (Buddhism) as it is used by Buddhists of Mahar origin? First of all, Buddhism is described in generalized terms, such as the Five Precepts that are listed in an almost liturgical manner. An employee of the University of Pune, 36-year old, father of two, divorced and currently living with a brahman woman, tells me: 'I consider myself Buddhist and I am acknowledged as one by other people because I observe the Five Precepts (*pancashila*): no violence, no robbing, no adultery, no lying, no alcohol. . . . In the Buddhist religion, ethics (*niti*) occupies the same status as god (*deva*) in the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religions. Buddhism believes in morality but not in god.' The argument that is cited is that Buddhism does not have gods. The fact that Buddhism might not be a *dharma* but a *jivanamarga* (a way of life) is an interesting notion. This originally was probably translated from English (*Buddhism is not a religion but a way of life*). According to Richard Gombrich (1991a: 73), this expression was probably a result of the discussions among Western scholars who wondered if Buddhism was a religion, given its atheistic nature. Gombrich (1991a: 54-5) further says that this is an incorrect argument since Buddhism is theist in nature: it recognizes the necessity of Hindu gods for the well being of this world. According to him, a Buddhist who believes in gods cannot be accused of having done anything wrong. We will discuss this point in detail in the next chapter. What seems important to me here is the fact that modern Buddhists like Dharmapala claim that Buddhism is not really a religion when compared to the others because of its rational nature. Ambedkar used the same argument. He distinguished between *dhamma* and *dharma* to illustrate the differences between Buddhism, which is a religion based on principles of morality, and Hindu Brahmanism or Islam, which are religions based on law. For present-day Buddhists, this explanation highlights the gulf between the Buddhists and the Hindus. The convert no longer has to subject himself to religious beliefs that are looked upon as 'superstitious'. Buddhism only believes in the principles of equality, morality, and justice. A 40-year old Buddhist who teaches at the University of Pune talks about this particular subject:

I believe in Doctor Ambedkar who used to say that the Buddhist *dhamma* is a state of mind. It is the only religion that is scientific and rational.

Buddhism does not have conventions, dogmas and blind faith. We do not believe in Hindu gods. Dalits were denied entry into Hindu temples. Even today it is the same. But after conversion, no Buddhist feels the need to enter a Hindu temple. They do not waste their energy pointlessly. Buddhism is about enlightenment of the individual.

Scientific approach, rationalism, individual liberty, and atheism are effective arguments of this citation. However, this collective, stereotypical, and generalized view does not reveal much about the individual religiosity of the Buddhists.

Today's Buddhists consider themselves to be Ambedkar's successors and benefactors even though they are not familiar with his detailed argumentation on Buddhism or his views on the Four Noble Truths, karma, nirvana and sangha. They mention him in their treatises as a religious authority, which is an important point of reference. But apart from this intellectual subjugation to Ambedkar's thought, another fact is relevant. This discourse on Buddhism does not refer to notions of abstract salvation. The notions on Buddhism are developed in direct opposition to the notions of the Hindu *dharma*, which signifies the caste system (*jatibheda*), slavery (*gulami*), and blind faith (*andhashraddha*). All that is Hindu incites revolt (*vidroha*). The *Manusmriti* is the symbol of oppression of the untouchables. The brahmans are perceived as the main enemy and the source of all social evils. They are held responsible for all the discrimination that the former Mahars suffered. And Buddhism? It is seen as an antithesis to Hinduism and as a dialectic concept. *Dhamma* is associated with recurring notioms like equality, brotherhood, independance besides humanism, humanity, objectivity, science, scientific outlook, and justice. Love, non-violence, peace, morality, wisdom, kindness, and the Five Precepts are recurring themes. These terms belong to what can be defined as canonical Buddhism. What might strike one as quite surprising is the absence of terms like *nirvana*, *pratitya-samutpada* and *samadhi*. The crucial notions of Buddhist soteriology as discussed in the ancient Pali and Sanskrit texts have not been retained.

CONSTRUCTING A HISTORY

Every religious community questions about its origins and so do the Buddhists of today. This thought about ones origins is complex and refers to archaeological monuments as well as myths. It is often claimed for example, that the Mahars were the 'rulers and original

inhabitants of western India'. On the same line Baby Kamble talks about how proud she is to be a native of Maharashtra.

> I realized a number of things when I wrote this book. In the course of the book, the word Mahar appears. This word embarrasses the converted people of my caste. But why be ashamed? This word should make us hold our heads high. I call the gods to witness that I, a Mahar, am a native of the soil of Maharashtra. I am not a vagabond who has come here from some place else. This ground is my earth. This land has been named after us, Mahar. You cannot say the word; I do cherish it. It reminds me of the struggle. (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 259)

A Buddhist professor at the University of Pune, explained that the word Maharashtra means the 'kingdom of the Mahars'. This

Fig. 8: Ancient Buddhist sites in South Asia (drawing by the author).

etymology confirming the Mahars' noble ancestry is attested already by the linguistic speculations of Molesworth (1831) and Robertson's (1938) anthropological accounts. (It is not impossible that a Mahar kingdom did exist). One of the most important elements of contemporary Buddhist thought is, therefore, the notion of *dharanice putre* or *bhumiputra* (sons of the soil), also widely used by groups in South-East Asia and Sri Lanka who claimed land from others (Tambiah 1992: 86; Zelliot 1992a: 322).

In my interviews, I have always heard that the untouchables were the first inhabitants, the aboriginal Indian 'race' that was conquered by the Aryans. This notion comes from the Aryan race theory, developed by Western philologists, ethnologists, and historians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By com-paring languages, William Jones and Max Müller created the notion of an Indo-Aryan language family. Even though this notion was created from a linguistic point of view, the notions of an Aryan culture and religion as well as a common ethnic ancestry have been added on (Eliade 1987, I: 199-201; Trautmann 1997).

The Aryan question provoked a debate on India's native inhabitants. The Hindu nationalists categorically deny the possibility of an invasion, and believe that the Aryans were the founding fathers of the Indian civilization. This idea is based on the image of the Vedic period, during which the Aryan people who were powerful and advanced, ruled the world. Therefore, Sanskrit is the mother of all languages (Saraswati 1984). Already Jotirao Phule contested this stand and identified the lower classes, the shudras and the ati-shudras, as the first inhabitants of India who were not of Aryan stock (Phule 1991a). In the south, the Dravidian movement promoted the idea that the Dravidians were different and native (Barnett 1976; Dirks 1997a). In the same way, the associations of the untouchable castes used the prefixes *anarya* (non-Aryan) and *adi* (first) to lay claim to their aboriginal status.[33] The tribal people of the Indian population claimed to be the 'first occupants of the soil' by using the term *adivasi*. Even though Ambedkar refused to acknowledge a 'racial' difference between the brahmans and the untouchables (cf. Ambedkar 1990a: 78-85; 1990b: 304), this difference always played a predominant role in the building of the Buddhist identity. Given below is the editorial of the *Mulnivasi Times*, January 1995:

> It is clear today that the castes and the listed tribes, other backward classes and converts of minority religious communities constitute the indigenous

people of India. The Aryans came to India from other countries as invaders. They destroyed the culture and civilisation of the indigenous people. They imposed their Brahmanical culture on them. The Aryan Brahmins forced the native people into slavery. . . . There is no doubt that India and its native people should be liberated. They are still the Aryan Brahmin's slaves. The British were also invaders. But, they left the country. However, these Aryan Brahmins established their monopoly and supremacy over the country and its people. This is what we have to destroy, the monopoly and supremacy. India should be freed from Aryan Brahmin domination.

In this text that was written by a Buddhist of Aurangabad, the *mulanivasis* are different from the brahman 'foreigners'.[34] The indigenous Indian culture should be rebuilt and the domination of the brahmans destroyed.

One of the central elements supporting this claim of belonging to the aboriginal 'race' is the excavation of the Indus valley archaeological sites that date back to 3000-1500 BC. The Dalits claim that the Aryan invaders mercilessly destroyed this civilization. However, this theory is contradictory to what scientists believe. They are of the opinion that the civilisation was already in decline before the Aryans arrived. The theory of a single 'Aryan race' that was warlike and superior cannot be accepted either. The immigrations probably took place in waves and comprised mainly of semi-nomadic shepherds (Thapar 1990: 25-9).

There exists an interesting variant to these historical speculations: the theory that a group of 'indigenous' people, the Mahars and other untouchable castes, could have been Buddhist to begin with. The claim of being native is combined with the theory of an original religious commune.[35] This does not mean that the theory of the untouchables being a distinct part of the population is untrue. However, the difference is more cultural than 'racial'. In this vein, Iyothee Thass has already shown that the Pariahs are Tamil Buddhists who were the slaves of the brahmans (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993). By the same logic Ambedkar conceived the idea that the brahmans probably looked upon the Buddhists as untouchables in order to check the growing influence of the *dharma*. In an interview Raja Dhale argues on the same lines:

The former Buddhists are the Mahars, Chambars, and Matangs of today. That is why Doctor Ambedkar transformed the former Buddhists into new Buddhists. In this case, neither conversion nor a change has taken place. Their religion is not different. . . . The change of religion involves

Hindus. India has been Buddhist for centuries. Later, Hinduism replaced Buddhism. . . . The Hindus changed their religion. We did not. Words like 'conversion' and 'initiation' are misguiding terms.

Dhale claims to be of Buddhist origin and links the Buddhist past to the present. The Mahars, Chambhars and Matangs who were all discriminated against and are untouchables today, were Buddhist. The originality of Dhale's quote is the fact that the 'reconversion' of the untouchable castes to Buddhism can be looked upon as the return to one's roots. In order to understand the controversial angle of this quote, one has to understand that Dhale is addressing the Hindu nationalists who claim that India has always been a Hindu country (Golwalkar 1996; Bharti and Paliwal 1994; Sathe 1991).

The glorification of ancient Buddhism

Don't all Buddhists tend to glorify the history of Buddhism? Doctor Ambedkar saw Buddhism as one of the most progressive forces in Indian history that was suppressed for a long time by the reactionary brahmans. Contemporary Buddhists consider the period of Emperor Ashoka, the third century BC, the golden age. This was the first Buddhist empire in history.[36] India was rich, democratic and flourishing. Buddhism was at its zenith. Ashoka's empire spread over a vast area, from Afghanistan, as it exists today, to Bengal and from Nepal into the Deccan peninsula. The famous edicts that were engraved on rocks describe how Ashoka promoted Buddhism as a state religion and also protected other beliefs and traditions. Buddhism was probably the first proselytising religion that emphasized universal equality, truth, freedom, and morality. Thus democracy today is the result of ancient Buddhism. A 50-year old Buddhist who works for the Pune municipality explains: Formerly, the Buddhists lived in small republics. There was a code of ethics and a system of justice. The government took the people's opinions into consideration. The democratic set up was a lot like it is today. The Indian Constitution has incorporated the Buddhist philosophy. That is why India is a democracy today.

The Buddhist era in India is mythicized. According to D.C. Ahir (1989b: 113), the period from the third century BC up to the seventh century AD was the most prosperous in Indian history. The art and literature of this period, for instance, the great *stupas* at Bharhut and Sanchi and the Ajanta and Ellora caves, were unique and

incomparable. The Nalanda and Taxila universities prove that the study of sciences and arts has always been an integral part of Buddhist culture. An important point to note is that during this 'Buddhist' era, social exploitation, inequality and the caste system is said to have not existed.

Buddhists explain the decline of Buddhism in India as a result of the Brahmanical tyranny. The brahmans introduced *sati*, the caste system and religious prostitution.[37] They persecuted the Buddhists since they hated their egalitarian notions (Ahir 1996: 7; 1989: 118-28). Simultaneously, however, they adopted a few Buddhist practices and doctrines to please the masses and to compete with Buddhism. This is how Buddhism gradually declined in India. Ahir (1996: 63-8) points out that Buddhism was on the decline also because of certain internal reasons that weakened it. The most important factors were, however, 'external' as the loss of royal patronage, persecution, and oppression. Then came the Muslim invasions, which accomplished the rest. Muslims destroyed the monasteries and massacred the monks. Once the monasteries were destroyed, Buddhism died out completely in India. The disciples forgot about their heritage and lost their religious identity.[38]

Buddhism is considered an ancient universal religion, practised not only in India, but also in many European countries where Pali was once spoken. In a publication that claims to be scientific, Ha Bir Angar Ee (1994b: 124-5) identifies the Celts as former Buddhists. The gold lions of the royal throne at the Westminster Abbey are Buddhist symbols and the Celtic cross is nothing but the *svastika*. Others say that Buddhism influenced even Jesus and Christianity.[39]

Pali: the sacred Buddhist language

In connection with the updating of the ancient Buddhist symbols, Pali deserves mention, since it is considered to be Buddhism's ecclesiastical language. Ambedkar studied this language and accorded it a 'sacred' status, claiming that it was spoken by the Buddha and, thus is the authentic Buddhist language. Ambedkar compiled a Pali dictionary and a Pali grammar (Ambedkar 1998a). He wanted to give his disciples not only a tool that would help them translate the ancient texts, but also a practical method of learning, given that he considered Pali to be the best language in which to communicate with people in the Buddhist world. His disciples today still believe

in this idea. They claim that not only did the Buddha speak this language, but so did all the Buddhists at that time. They also claim that Pali was the language of the indigenous people of non-Aryan origin. Ha Bir Angar Ee (1994b) infers that Pali was probably 'the mother of Sanskrit'. All this is quite unreliable and can be refuted from a scientific point of view. But scientific value is not the point here. These theories are a part of the contemporary Buddhist discourse about history. A new historic past is created, one that is more glorious and older than the dominant Sanskrit culture. Sheshrao Meshram (1990: 70), a Buddhist and lecturer in Pali at the University of Aurangabad, suggests that the entire *Tipitaka* be translated into Marathi and other modern Indian languages. He also suggests that Buddhist research centres devoted to the study of Pali, the language of the Master, be founded.

However, Pali is not systematically used. We notice this when we leave the 'scholarly' views and the citing of normative texts behind. I have already mentioned that the Buddhists prefer to use the Pali term for Buddhism, which is *dhamma* instead of *dharma*. This distinction dates back to Ambedkar. But the wheel of the *dhamma* is not called *dhammacakka* but the *dhammacakra*, which is a mélange of both Marathi, Sanskrit and Pali. Indeed Pali, Marathi and Sanskrit terms appear alongside each other. Pali appears in its purest form when it is used during rituals. The Three Refuges, the Five Precepts, the Noble Eightfold Path and the hymns about Ambedkar, like the *Bhimasmarana*, are recited in Pali.

Adaptation of the Ramayana

Historical claims find their roots in mythology. An important example is the 'heterodox' interpretation of the *Ramayana*. According to this interpretation, which was borrowed from the Dravidian movement, Ravana is the protagonist and Rama, the villain. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (1879-1973), called Periyar (the Great Man), one of the founding fathers of the Dravidian movement, published a critique of the *Ramayana* in 1930. The translated English version appeared in 1959. In this, he portrayed Rama and Sita as abominable characters and Ravana as the protagonist, a symbol of south India (cf. Kumar 1999; Ramasami 1980; Richman 1991b). It is not known if he is the first to have conceived these ideas, or whether he reformulated an ancient

tradition.[40] This same text is quoted today. V.T. Hirekar, an Ambedkarite from Patna, claims that Ravana was in fact a Dravidian king who was Buddhist (Singh 1993: 7). Ravana is proclaimed to be a model emperor, judicious and fair, a king of the natives and who frees people whom the Aryans. Rama is the Hindu aggressor who conquers Lanka to annihilate this peaceful Buddhist kingdom. Thus 'orthodox' Hindu mythology is reversed. Omvedt (1995: 58-9, 102) interprets rightly these variants of the *Ramayana* as counter depictions. This is the way in which the peasants, Dalits, farmers, and the tribal population protested against the dominant Hindu brahmanical ideology.

Daya Pawar put a new and interesting formula relating to these anti-establishment myths. In a song called '*We are not your monkeys*', Pawar describes how Rama used Hanuman, portrayed as an ancient tribal divinity, and his army of monkeys, to conquer the island of Lanka.[41] Pawar reinterprets Hindu mythology. The protagonist is no longer Rama, but the tribal population and the untouchables who, along with Ravana, become the innocent victims. Pawar accuses the Hindus of always having used the untouchables to do their dirty work and for treating them like monkeys. He ends by saying that the Hindus would like to use the army of monkeys again to kill and annihilate innocent people. And this time the victims would be the Muslims. Pawar links this to the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya and in this manner he exposes Hindu nationalism. But the situation has changed. The Dalits are not the Hindu's monkeys any longer.

From Cokamela to the Buddha

Another example that illustrates the critical revaluation of history is the new interpretation of Cokamela, the famous *bhakti* poet, by Dalit writers. Before minutely examining the Buddhists' rereading of this poet, the specific characteristics of the *varakari sampradaya* should be outlined. This religious tradition dates back to around the thirteenth century and reveres Vithoba of Pandharpur who has already been mentioned. The poets, among whom there are a large number of women, did not write in Sanskrit but in a vernacular language that was Marathi. This is not surprising as the majority of the movement's followers belong to the 'low' castes. Eknath and Dnyaneshvar were brahmans, but the other poets came from modest

backgrounds. Namdev was a tailor, Tukaram undoubtedly one of the most popular saints of Maharashtra belonged to the peasant caste and the poet Kanhopatra was a dancer and courtesan. There are also saints who are Mahars like Cokamela, his wife Soyrabai, and his sister Nirmala (Chitre 1991; Ranade 1988; Subramanium 1991; Vaudeville 1977; Zelliot 1992a: 3-32).

In principle, caste has no significance for a staunch believer (*bhakta*) when he meets god. Love of god, emotion, abandoning of the person and union with god is what really counts. In the eyes of the divinity, everybody is equal. Vaudeville (1991: 67) writes that 'when devotion concerns only the worship of the holy name, social barriers do not exist: God's name is accessible to everyone, including the "untouchables"'. *Bhakti,* like Buddhism, is therefore often cited for its egalitarian and anti-caste views and its tendency to protest (Thapar 1990: 308; Lele 1995b). One wonders if this revolutionary spirit has been overstated. Cokamela's life reveals the level to which the *bhakta*'s stand was really quite unclear. For instance, because he is impure, he does not have the right to enter the temple of his revered god at Pandharpur! In his poems, he speaks of his suffering without wanting to criticize the 'caste system'. He writes about cruelty and injustice, but instead of protesting, he asks the high castes to have pity and he seeks Vithoba's protection (Shelke 1991: 18.129; Gokhale 1980: 30). Could it be that the *bhakti* movement has adapted itself very well to institutionalized inequality? Omvedt (1976: 54) infers that the anti-caste aspect of the *bhakti* movement is concerned only with the religious sphere. In some ways, without questioning the social connotation of *dharma* and the social hierarchy which it implies, *bhakti* represents the devotional dimension of Hinduism, and the possibility of salvation for all.

If we take these remarks into consideration, Cokamela no longer appears as progressive as before. Surely, in Dalit Buddhists' eyes, the words and deeds that imply total subjugation hinder the plan to emancipate themselves and opposes the spirit of revolt. This is why this particular poet has been reread critically. While, at the beginning of the twentieth century, he played an important role in the Mahar imagination, this gradually disappeared with the advent of the Dalit movement.[42] Ambedkar himself criticised the religious devotion and the pilgrimages, comparing them to superstitious practices. He dissuaded his first wife from going on a pilgrimage to Pandharpur and from prostrating herself on the stele of Cokamela. In 1954, he

refused to inaugurate a temple of Cokamela, in Dehu, a small town on the outskirts of Pune.[43] But he was not an absolute critic of the *bhakti* movement since he considered the great poet Kabir his guru, alongside the Buddha and Phule (Ambedkar 1997c: 104).

When one examines the situation today, one notices that the Dalit discourse deals a lot with critiques of Cokamela. The main argument is that the *bhakti* movement cannot improve the untouchable castes' lot (Bagul 1992: 277-8). Gangadhar Pantawane, the Dalit writer, acknowledges that Cokamela was a pioneer of the untouchable writers, but never questioned the social order. He would have never protested against the Hindu spirit and culture since he 'blindly' believed in Vithoba. Pantawane called upon the Dalit writers to reject this conformist attitude and to denounce the injustice and atrocities of the system (Joshi 1986: 80). Baby Kamble and Ulpabai Chauhan share the same viewpoint and add, 'Nobody pays Cokhamela respects nowadays. Not at all. But Babasaheb Ambedkar is always before us. The things he has done are written on our hearts' (Chauhan and Kamble 1992: 294).

These words correspond with my observations. I have not met any Buddhist who has proudly spoken to me about Cokamela. I have not seen any picture, photograph, or symbol representing the poet saint in a Buddhist house. The followers of the *varkari sampradaya*, even today, sing his songs of devotion dedicated to Vithoba (Zelliot 1992a: 93), but to the Buddhists he is no longer an important name. In their eyes, he symbolizes a shameful past that ought to be definitely forgotten.

NOTES

1. *The Diamond Needle* discusses the absurdity of the brahmanical system of varna. Unfortunately, the text does not shed any light on the author or when it was written. Some say it was Ashvaghosha, others say it was the work of Maharashtrian saints (O'Hanlon 1985: 225-7; Hodgson 1972: 126-33; Weber 1983; Dwivedi 1985).
2. In reality, Nehru helped direct the writing of the Constitution and the entire Drafting Committee cooperated as well. Ambedkar, as the President of this Committee, nevertheless had the power to accept or reject the amendments, without having to justify himself.
3. Ambedkar is compared to Manu for the contribution he made to the writing of the Constitution, a comparison that he rejected (*Dr. Ambedkar: The Principle Architect of the Constitution of India*, Governement of Maharashtra

Press, Mumbai, 1994, *BAWS*, vol. 13: 1163).The *tertium comparationus* consists of the common legislative authority. Jogesh Sarkar (1988: 36) calls, having probably in mind the *Manusmriti*, the Indian Constitution *Ambedkarasmriti*. However this is profoundly ironic as V. Suresh (1988: 377) points out, since Ambedkar himself rejected the laws of Manu.

4. C.M. Wagh, 'Lord Bheema', in *Thoughts on Doctor Ambedkar*, H.L. Nim (ed.), Agra, 1969, Siddhartha Educational and Cultural Society, pp. 10-11. Eleanor Zelliot (1992a: 54) only cites 12 stanzas.
5. This tree is an important symbol as the Buddha attained enlightenment under its branches.
6. There is another English version of the same poem that is slightly different. It is titled 'Buddha' (Anand and Zelliot 1992: 127; Zelliot 1985: 147).
7. Legend has it that 'the garden of the prince Jeta' close to the town, Shravasti, was bought for the Buddha by a very rich merchant. The latter offered this place to the Buddha who used it as a place of rest during the rains.
8. Werule and Verul are the other names for Ellora.
9. 'The holy land of the West' is a utopian concept typical of the Mahayana Buddhism.
10. Cf. the translation published by Zelliot (1992a: 295-6).
11. Cf. the translation published by Anand and Zelliot (1992: 137).
12. Mariai is a village goddess and the patron deity of the Mahars and the Matangs. The Mahars consider her to be the protector against epidemics (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 150-5 and 177-81; Patwardhan 1973: 55).
13. Mahisha (or Mhasoba) is a demon in the form of a buffalo (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 150 and 154-5)
14. A famous Maharashtrian divinity, considered to be a manifestation of Shiva, worshipped at the Jejuri temple (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 17; Sontheimer 1992: 124-5).
15. Bahiroba is a divinity that protects against illness (Berntsen and Zelliot 1992: 334).
16. Along with the other songs by the same author, this text was published by B.B. Jadhav, in the form of a small, badly printed brochure: Bhimrao Pavar, 'Ramji Sutana', in *Bharataratna Shatabdi Gani*, Maharashtra Printers, Bombay, 1990, p. 6.
17. In 1935, during a conference at Yeola, Ambedkar announced that he would not die a Hindu (*mi hindu dharmata marnara nahi*).
18. In Pali, *vandana* means 'salutation', 'homage', 'veneration'. For the Marathi text, see *Bhima Gitamala*, published by B. Tarkase and S. Savarde, Kranti Printing Press, Ambajogai, 1993, p. 1.
19. Ambedkar listed the three essential Buddhist elements as 'wisdom' (Sanskrit *prajna*), 'morality' (Sanskrit *shila*) and 'compassion' (Sanskrit *karuna*).

20. *Jayabhima Gitamala*, published by Vishnu Shinde, Jaibhim Prakashan, Bombay, 1992, p. 2.
21. The 'path'' (Sanskrit *marga*, Pali *magga*) is an ancient Indian soteriological notion. According to Buddhism, one attains salvation by leading a life following the Noble Eightfold Path.
22. Dhondiram Rode, 'Jayanti Gita', in *Samadesa Gitamala*, booklet of songs published by Bhaskar Rode. The date or publisher are not mentioned.
23. Ambedkar's Buddhist followers greet each other by saying *Jaya Bhima* (Victory to Bhim!). According to J. Gokhale (1993: 181), the slogan dates back to 1956. In a Hindu ritual context, the term *jaya*, pronounced once or repeatedly, is used to invoke the gods (Bühnemann 1984: 83).
24. The *pippala* tree (Pali *piphala*) is a type of fig tree and is the same as the *bodhi* tree.
25. I thank Guy Poitevin and Hema Raikar of the Centre for Cooperative Social Research, Pune, for access to the songs of the millstone.
26. In Marathi the terms *pushtaka* and *grantha* signify a printed book.
27. According to Zelliot (1992a: 290), the expression 'Mother Bhim' is in accordance with the ancient Marathi convention of making the gods and saints feminine in order to evoke a sense of creation and protection.
28. Ramnath Cavhan, *Sahave Akhila Bharatiya Dalit Natya Sammelan*, *Adhyaksya Bhasana*, published by Jnaneshvara & Bhosle, Pune, 1992. J.N. Paranjape wrote an English version. Extracts of the English text have been made freely available by G. Naggies (cf. http://unet.univie.ac.at/~a8702482/cahvan.htm).
29. Bhimrao Kardak, 'Dharmantara' (Hindi), in *Dalita Rangamanca*, published by K. Gangavane and T. Mahajan, Krishna Brothers, Ajmer, 1986.
30. Cf. for example her poems 'Bosom Friend', 'Slave' and 'O Great Man' published by Anand and Zelliot (1992: 27-33).
31. Cf. *Dr. Ambedkar and the Hindu Code Bill*, Mumbai, 1995, *BAWS*, vol. 14.
32. The *pranidhanas* of a *bodhisattva* are to attain enlightenment (*bodhi*) and to save all humans by leading to *nirvana*.
33. The most well-known examples are: the Anarya Dosh Parihar Samaj, the Ad Dharm Mandal, the Adi Dravida Mahajan Sabha, the Adi-Andhra Mahajan Sabha, the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, the Adi-Keralotharana Sabha and the Adi-Karnataka Sangh.
34. In Marathi, the term *mula* means 'root' or 'origin' and *nivasi*, 'inhabitant'.
35. According to some, the term *mahar* is composed of two Sanskrit words, 'great' (*maha*) and 'enemy' (*ari*). This would mean that the Mahars were the 'great enemies' of the brahmans, Aryans and non-Buddhists (Naito 1997: 200; Phule 1991b: 66; Ramteke 1983: 92).
36. Ashoka is not venerated only by the Buddhist Mahars. He played an

important role in the historical lore of the Theravada tradition. In the modern Sinhalese context, he is honoured as a predecessor of Marx and Lenin among others (Gombrich 1991b: 134; Lingat 1989).

37. In the area on the borders of Maharashtra and Karnataka the custom of offering young girls to the goddess Yallamma is still practised. They are temple dancers and are, in a way, sacred prostitutes (*devadasi*). According to Chhaya Datar (1992: 84), these young girls are mostly Mahars or Matangs.
38. These theories are widely known and have already been promoted by Ambedkar (Ambedkar 1987b: 238; Ahir 1996: 70; Waghmare 1995: 216). The decline of Buddhism is a highly debated subject in Indian history. Some believe that internal factors caused its disintegration. However, they concluded that the Muslim invaders dealt the 'final blow', by destroying community structures and by forcing the Buddhists to convert (Sankrityayan 1995: 587; Ling 1980: 46). But, one wonders if the conversions that were forced and on a large scale are actually untrue (Mujeeb 1967). The conversion to Islam could also be looked upon as a dynamic adjustment to a new socio-economic situation (Maclean 1989).
39. See the ideas of K.N. Kadam, 74 years old, former civil servant and famous Buddhist in Pune. His thoughts can be found in his article, 'The Influence of Buddhism on Early Christianity'. Kadam cites Kersten (1983) on Jesus in India.
40. There does exist an ancient Buddhist text that describes Ravana as a great man. The *Lankavatarasutra*, which dates back to the third and fourth centuries, is one of the most important texts of the Mahayana. In this Ravana, the king of the *yakshas*, invites the Buddha to Lanka. The Buddha goes there and preaches his philosophy. Ravana is described as an intelligent and pious person who has no difficulty understanding the Buddha's teachings. Cf. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1999 [1932].
41. The video, '*We are not your monkeys*' directed by the Mahasashtrian film maker Anand Patwardhan, is of great interset.
42. A number of Mahar schools, students' hostels and associations were bearing his name. The Shri Chokamela Samaj in Nagpur is an example (Kshirsagar 1994: 104-5; Zelliot 1992a: 11).
43. Ambedkar refused to do so saying he would come if a Buddhist temple were being built. On 25 December 1954, with thousands of people as witnesses, Ambedkar unveiled a statue of the Buddha that he had brought from Burma, and thus was inaugurated the first Mahar Buddhist temple in Dehu Road (Keer 1994: 482; Zelliot 1979a: 234).

5. (Re-)inventing Buddhist Rituals

Before starting on an enquiry into the rituals practised by present-day Buddhists some general remarks are necessary.[1] In order to avoid definitions that give these phenomena an exclusive meaning, their multiple social, political, and religious significances should always be kept in mind. But it has to be underlined that this thesis is essentially a study of the Buddhist discourse. In other words, I would like to understand the conceptualization of rituals. We will take a look at how these Ambedkarite Buddhists have (re-)invented a new ritual tradition with images, temples, sacred texts, and a specific calendar for festivals. We will also see how they solve controversies and conflicts about its practice.

CREATING A SACRED TOPOGRAPHY

In Maharashtra, there are some seven hundred ancient Buddhist caves that are considered by the Buddhists as 'their' religious places (Ahir 1989b; Gokhale 1976b; Prajakta 1997). The most famous of these are those of Ajanta, Ellora, Bhaja, Bedsa, Aurangabad, Mahad, Karla and Nashik. Many Buddhists visit these places regularly, as excursions can be easily organized. Some organizations like the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha have even integrated meditation in their programme at these caves.

There are also the 'classic' Buddhist places in north India such as Lumbini (Kapilavastu), the Buddha's place of birth, Bodh Gaya, the place where he attained enlightenment, Sarnath, the place where he delivered his first sermon, and Kushinagara, the place where he attained *mahaparinirvana*. Vaishali and Rajgir (Rajagriha) are famous for the extraordinary events concerning the presence of the Buddha. These ancient monuments have been re-appropriated through various practices. The ritual manuals describe these places as

Fig. 9: The Chawdar Tank in Mahad with *torana* (photograph by the author).

tirthasthane (sites of worship), *mangala sthale* (sacred places) and *lahana sthale* (famous places) (The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 96-7; Patil 1991: 62-6). Those who visit these places, far from Maharashtra, are obviously the fortunate among the Buddhists who can afford the tour.

The Buddhist topography also includes some 'sacred' places (*arvacina mangala sthale*) sanctified by the life of Ambedkar. Mhow, where he was born, is commemorated by the term *Janmabhumi*. There is a museum on the ground floor of his residence in Mumbai, *Rajgriha*. Similarly, Mahad is commemorated as *Krantibhumi* (land of revolution). Huge monuments stand at the Chawdar Tank where Ambedkar drank water and then burnt the *Manusmriti*. The *Dikshabhumi* (the land of initiation) is at Nagpur, the *Caityabhumi*,[2] the place where he was cremated, in Mumbai. For long, the Buddhist supporters of Ambedkar have asked the government to build a National Memorial on the Alipur Road in New Delhi, his last residence (*Parinirvanasthana*). I have already mentioned that Siddharth College in Mumbai and the Milind College in Aurangabad are also places of extraordinary symbolic importance (Ahir 1988: 75-115; Patil 1991: 66-7; The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 97).

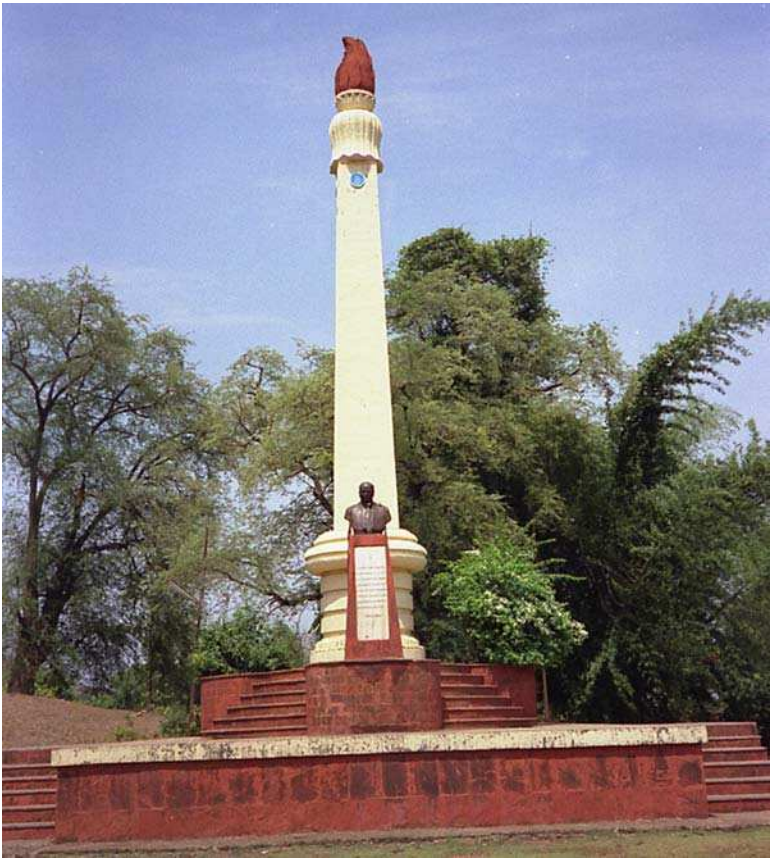

Fig. 10: Krantibhumi in Mahad (photograph by the author).

Re-appropriating sites of worship

Through the publication and distribution of propaganda tracts, and through manifestations and demonstrations, Buddhists have created for themselves an imaginary history that had hitherto belonged to Hindus. The appropriation of Nashik, one of the most sacred Hindu sites is telling. In a Marathi tract, *Trirashmi Bauddha Leni*, by the Buddhist Research Centre Nashik, it is stated that Nashik was an important Buddhist intellectual centre during the time when the famous caves were constructed. All the inhabitants would have been Buddhists: Mahars, Chambhars, Malis, Telis, Sonars, Lohars, Salis or Sutars (the communities that are now considered as backward or untouchable). As evidence, the tract gives an etymological explanation for the name Nashik: it must have originated from the Sanskrit word *nastika*. The city might have been named so because of its inhabitants who did not worship god or respect the authority of the Vedas, as they were in fact Buddhists. The tract concludes by indicating that the present name Pandu Leni (caves of Pandu) is wrong and the real name would be Trirashmi Bauddha Leni (the caves of three rays). This line of reasoning is interesting, not so much because of the debatable historical evidence but rather because of the rivalry and the confrontation it reveals. By visiting these caves one finds that the statues of the Buddha bear traces of Hindu

Fig. 11: The Buddha is worshipped as an avatara of Vishnu in the Buddhist caves of Nashik (photograph by the author).

devotion. The Buddha is worshipped as an incarnation of Vishnu. Moreover, there is a sculpture of Hanuman, just outside the caves, that is painted in red and also worshipped. The Buddhists consider the strong Hindu presence on this site an affront. Munshilal Gautam (1995: 227) and the activists of the Buddhist Research Centre Nashik have asked for the official restitution of the original name.

In the same contextual framework, I would like to mention the Karla caves, probably constructed in the first century BC. There is a temple of Ekavira, the goddess of the Kolis, on this site (Ahir 1986: 115). Hindu devotees and pilgrims come here to offer animal sacrifices, which certain Buddhists consider as an impediment to the santity of this place. Some Buddhists feel that they should liberate these caves from Hindu occupation. In fact, Munshilal Gautam (1995: 226) condemns the fact that millions of tourists have profaned this site, entering without removing their footwear and clicking photographs. Their lack of respect is an affront to the Buddhist community. Neither the Indian government nor the Department of Archaeology maintains this site properly.

Re-appropriation is not confined to the Buddhist caves in Maharashtra. Some reputed Hindu shrines are claimed to be ancient Buddhist temples. The most striking example is that of the temple of Vithoba in Pandharpur, a town situated on the banks of the Bhima river in Solapur district. According to certain Buddhists this used to be a Buddhist temple. This proposition is not new: historians and philologists have already made it (Deleury 1994: 126-30). Robertson (1938: 94-5) thought that certain Buddhist elements are present in the rituals practised in Pandharpur. Ambedkar himself had declared that the image of Vithoba in Pandharpur is that of the Buddha (Keer 1994: 482). This idea persists, in spite of the absence of scientific validity. A militant Buddhist, who had a picture of Ambedkar alongside a beautiful image of Vithoba in his apartment, explained to me that this divinity must have been of Buddhist origin and that the Hindus, on finding it, must have integrated it into their religion. There are others who claim that Vithoba is a reincarnation of the Buddha (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 194).

The example of Pandharpur is not the only one. There are many others: the Jagannatha temple at Puri in Orissa and the Tirumalai temple in Tamil Nadu are claimed to be ancient Buddhist temples (Shastri 1989: 167; Jamanadas 1991: 18-27, 175-82; Ahir 1996: 56). But the most famous example is that of Bodh Gaya which is probably

one of the most 'sacred' sites of the Buddhist world. The young prince Siddhartha who had left his palace and family attained enlightenment (*bodhi*) here on a full moon night in the month of *vaishakha*. It is difficult to tell exactly when this place came to be known as a site for worship and pilgrimage. According to ancient Pali texts, the Buddha himself might have said that this place should be visited with respect and that it would help people liberate themselves from the cycle of life and death. According to other legends, Emperor Ashoka constructed a temple on this site. The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang mentions a Buddhist temple in his writings that dates to the seventh century. After this text many others mentioned the existence of the temple and a Buddhist sangha that resided there. The temple must have thus acquired importance as a Buddhist pilgrimage centre. Monks from Tibet, Burma, and Sri Lanka probably came here to commemorate the Buddha's enlightement. Why and how the temple lost its importance and gradually began to change are questions one knows very little about. In the sixteenth century Mahant Gosain Giri founded a Hindu monastery. It is with the arrival of Dharmapala in 1891 that the importance of Bodh Gaya was re-established. He was shocked by the dilapidated state of the site and succeeded in convincing some

Fig. 12: Caityabhumi in Mumbai (poster).

monks to stay in Bodh Gaya and take charge of it. However, the chief of the monastery refused to admit them on the site, as he considered it his property. The relations between Buddhists and Hindus started to heat up. After Independence, the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Act decided that the temple be administered by a committee comprising four Buddhists, four Hindus and a president who is a Hindu.

Today, there are several Buddhist, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and Burmese monasteries on this site. Once again this place has acquired international recognition as a pilgrimage site (Ahir 1994b; Kantowsky 1999: 67-9). In June 1992, the Liberate Bodh Gaya Movement (or Mahabodhi Vihar Liberation Action Committee) presided over by the Japanese monk Arya Nagarjun Surai Sasai, was founded.[3] The enthusiastic participation of Dalit activists in this movement is particularly interesting (Lynch 1998). Various protests other than manifestations, hunger strikes, and threats of self-immolation are regularly conducted. In an interview, Bhante Anand, the secretary general of this association, reiterates that the temple must be handed over to Buddhists. In 1994, the activists had even threatened the government of Bihar that they would boycott the elections if the temple was not handed over to the Buddhists. Even

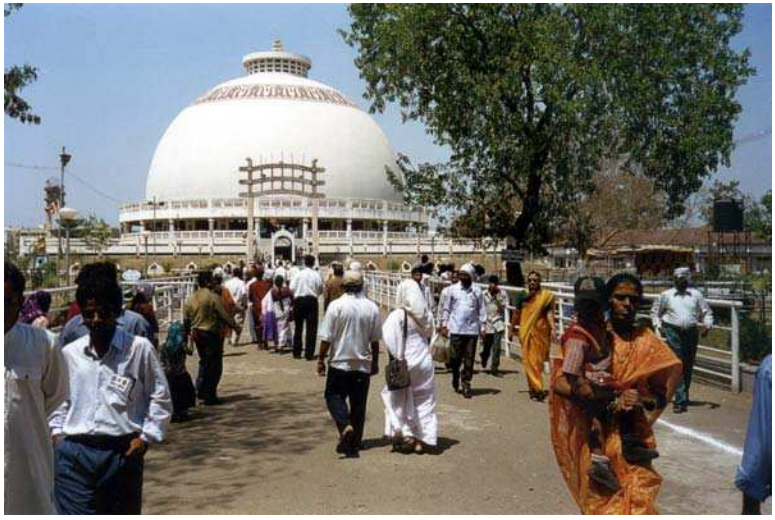

Fig. 13: Dikshabhumi in Nagpur (photograph by the author).

today the situation has not changed much.[4] A comparison between the re-appropriations of historic sites by the Buddhists and by the Hindu nationalists would, thus, not be out of place. The Ayodhya and Bodh Gaya conflicts manifest highly separatist tendencies. The efforts made by the Buddhists to regain possession of 'their' ancient sites of worship and their claim to be the aboriginal population of India bring out characteristics that could be called 'fundamentalist'.

New stupas

The Buddhists have resurrected the stupa, one of the most important elements of ancient Buddhist architecture. Today the site that the Buddhists call *Caityabhumi* is situated in Dadar in Mumbai, where Ambedkar was cremated. A huge monument, which resembles a stupa and contains the funerary relics of Dr Ambedkar, has been constructed here. This stupa is different from those at Sanchi and Bharhut as it is hollow, with a big hall under the cupola, into which the doors and windows allow sunlight. At the centre stands an altar with statues, photos, and images of the Buddha and Ambedkar. Devotees remove their footwear before entering, and go around this altar in a clockwise direction. This stupa is thus a place of worship that resembles a temple more than a reliquary. The *bhikkhus* who maintain this place and carry out the rites, stay on the second floor of the building, directly below the cupola. The main entrance is decorated with elephants, the *dharmacakra* and other symbols borrowed from classical Buddhist iconography.

In Nagpur, a huge stupa, called *Dikshabhumi,* was constructed at the place where Ambedkar converted of Buddhism. The cupola covers an enormous reunion hall and a number of rooms. Apparently there were some financial problems while completing this project as is indicated by the fact that the building is still empty. A fence and portals, just like the one at Sanchi, which shows that the architects have used the same designs, surround the monument. The material used is cement, not brick or stone. But on the whole the visitor gets the impression that the monument is 'authentically' Buddhist. The stupa at Dehu is less spectacular. More interesting is the *Caitanya Stupa* of Nashik. This monument belongs to Ramabai Ambedkar Kanya Vidyalaya, a school for young girls founded by the Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar Jhnyan Kendra. On the ground

floor stands a slab that contains the ashes of Ambedkar. On 24 December 1991, on his birth centenary, the Dalai Lama visited this place to pay homage to Ambedkar. This stupa, painted in white, appears to be impressive due to its simplicity. It has a parasol and is surrounded by a garden.

It should be mentioned here that the Buddhists have not been the only ones to resurrect the stupa. The Indian government has constructed numerous buildings and monuments, which reflect the use of designs inspired by the stupas, caves, and Buddhist monasteries, to pay its homage. On the occasion of his birth centenary, a statue of Ambedkar, a relief showcasing how he climbed down the stairs of the Chawdar Tank and drank the prohibited water, a plaque engraved with the first lines of the Indian Constitution, and a portal that resembles those at the stupa of Sanchi, were constructed in Mahad. The huge portal at the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University conforms to the typical designs of the portals in Buddhist caves. The Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Museum and Memorial, a tribute made to him by the Symbiosis Institute, a private university in Pune, also proves as a good example. But its architect, who designed this monument in the shape of a stupa, is not a Buddhist. The founder of the institute, who wanted his students to commemorate this great personality, is actually a brahman. This explains why this monument is not well known and is rarely frequented, or even boycotted, by most of the Buddhists.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA AND IN DR BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR

I would like to explore the role that the ritual tradition of Theravada Buddhism, followed by Ambedkar and his adepts, plays. To what extent are the rites resurrected? All the ancient Buddhist schools recited the Three Refuges and worshipped the Buddha as acts of devotion. Archaeological excavations have proved that the stupas of Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, and Sarnath were pilgrimage sites where relics were worshipped. In those days, the Buddhists worshipped the Buddha by offering him regular prayers, and believed that he had specific powers and could bring about miracles. Thus since the beginning, Buddhist 'orthodoxy' has justified the veneration of the Buddha and other sacred objects (B. Gokhale 1994; Werner 1994).

Puja

The Buddhist *puja* is carried out at home, in a temple (*vihara*), as well as at any public place. Some of the Buddhists practice it daily, whereas others only on the occasion of reunions or festivals. Statues, images, and photographs of the Buddha and of Ambedkar are placed on an altar. The Buddha occupies a place at the centre whereas Ambedkar is placed below him. Some offerings, flowers, are placed in front of the altar.

The ritual starts with the lighting of candles and incense sticks. Then the statues or the photographs of the Buddha and Ambedkar are decorated with garlands of flowers. Everyone goes up to the altar and bows down to do *pranama.* Some fold their hands in prayer.

While performing this ritual, the participants recite verses in Pali. In fact today, there is a canon of verses to be recited as part of the Theravada tradition. Laymen as well as monks recite these texts, which are spread through various ritual manuals and music cassettes, in groups. The recitation of these verses can be carried out on any occasion. The most important of the verses are the *sarana*,[5] the Three Refuges[6] and the *parittas*[7] (protective formulas). According to the Pali tradition the *paritrana patha* (protective recitation) consists of the chanting of the *Mettasutta*,[8] *Ratanasutta*[9] and *Mahamangalasutta*.[10] The question that arises is how Buddhists of today understand these texts written in an ancient language. In some of the ritual manuals, a Marathi translation has certainly been provided, but one may have doubts about the need for translation. Perhaps the concentration on the textual meaning is mistaken. Are these texts not simply recited like *mantras*? We shall revert to this question later in this chapter.

Temples

The term that the Buddhists use to designate their site of worship is *vihara*,[11] although some of them do use the Hindu term *mandira*. Some *viharas* are converted ancient Hindu sanctuaries where the Buddha and Ambedkar have replaced the statues of Hindu gods. In other cases, public halls have been constructed with an altar for a bronze statue of the Buddha, and next to it were some images of Ambedkar. There are yet other temples that are even simpler, with just a small plaster statue of the Buddha and some images of Ambedkar hung on the wall.

As far as the function of these temples is concerned, Gary

Tartakov (1994: 187) claims that the *viharas* in Maharashtra are not sites of religious worship. According to him the images of the Buddha and Ambedkar are neither 'sacred' nor are they looked after by a priest in a specific place allotted to them. But in my opinion these remarks are false. In my experience, Buddhists come to the temples to pay homage to the Buddha and Ambedkar, offer prayers, make wishes, and perform various rituals. In Nagpur there is a huge temple where the statue of the Buddha is separated from the rest of the room by an iron partition. Why then should this place be denied the status of a 'sacred' site of worship?

Images

As mentioned earlier Ambedkar's personality is a visually impressive one. His intelligence, his leadership qualities, and his political achievements conjure up a symbolic entity that answers the expectations of the Buddhists and allows them to appreciate him, know him and recognize him. His pictures are omnipresent and are the normative decorative item for every Buddhist ritual and ceremony. These images are found on the walls, in the houses of Buddhists, and at their work places. Small or big, black and white or coloured, in the form of a poster, a photo, a sticker, a statue, a bust or an amulet, Dr Ambedkar is present everywhere in the Buddhist colonies. Ambedkar's statues manifest the Buddhist presence in public places and project an immediate political message.[12] One can also find posters of Ramabai Ambedkar, the Buddha, Kabir, Jotirao Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Periyar, and those of some of the present leaders like Ramdas Athavale.

The pictures of Ambedkar are standard ones where he always wears the same clothes: a blue coat, a white shirt and a tie, a pen in the coat pocket. He is the modern Westernized man, well fed, dressed as he used to in life, in a style totally different from the way Gandhi[13] did. Ambedkar has always been painted in these pictures as a student, an advocate, or as 'the father of the Constitution'. The most famous image of him is the one that has been standardized by his statue in front of Parliament in Delhi. The slight movement of his legs, his raised arm and index finger represent his rebel mindset. The other versions, where Ambedkar is seen talking over the telephone, holding a pen in one hand sitting behind a table on which is placed the Constitution and his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, show him as an ideal administrator, a head, a leader.

The standardization of Ambedkar's images can be explained by a simple technical detail: all have been developed from the limited number of available photographs (cf. the collection of photos published by Keer in 1982). On the other hand, the images show traits that are considered as the most characteristic ones by the Buddhists (Tartakov 1994: 183).

These images are influenced by popular Indian art and cannot be said to constitute a distinct Buddhist aesthetic. Posters and calendars represent a pan-Indian medium of religious expression (Smith 1997: 36-43). The artists who generally produce these images unite different symbolic systems. Thus, Ambedkar's childhood is represented by the image of a child sleeping in a lotus flower (Fig. 3), which is the image that represents Krishna as a child. Similarly, Ambedkar's conversion is described as the *darshana* of the Buddha, a term signifying the relation between the divinity, his idol and the devotee in the Hindu religion (Fuller 1992: 59-62; Reiniche 1994: 159). The symbolic references of the images as well as their functions are indeed similar to those of Hindu posters. The posters of the Buddha and Dr Ambedkar are objects of veneration.

Is there a relation between the 'classic' Buddhist art and the representations of Ambedkar? Like Gary Tartakov (1994: 184), can we conclude that contemporary Buddhist creativity stems directly from ancient Buddhist art? There are several answers to this question. First of all, the contemporary Buddhist artistic representations certainly contain symbols like the stupa, and *dharmacakra*, and statues of the Buddha have been revived. Yet, although contemporary Buddhist art is to some extent influenced by popular Indian art, there are also some innovative, aitistic expressions that characterize the peculiarity of the contemporary Buddhist creativity. I consider the painting by Bali Khaire as a good example (Fig. 7). The artist has painted the *bodhi* tree, the roots of which show Ambedkar's face and its foliage and branches represent the Buddha's head. One would have expected the Buddha to be at the base of the tree and Ambedkar to represent the fruits. The message is unambiguous.

Flags

There are two Buddhist flags, one blue with a white *dharmacakra*, and a multicoloured *dhammadhvaja*. The origin of the blue flag probably dates back to the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942. On this very occasion, Waman Godbole introduced a blue silk flag

with a white sun at the centre surrounded by eleven white stars. The sun symbolized Ambedkar and the eleven stars, the eleven provinces (Moon 2001: 65). With the creation of the RPI, the successor of the Scheduled Castes Federation, the flag took its present form. Kamble, a RPI activist, added the white *dharmacakra*.[14] But it should be noted that the flag is not exclusively the logo of the RPI. It is used by all the Ambedkarite Buddhists for public demonstrations, whether they are members of the RPI or not. It is also used to decorate altars during religious ceremonies. Further, it indicates Buddhist localities in any urban settlement. A flag indicates the dominance of a certain community in an area: for example, green flags represent Muslims, and saffron flags, Hindus.

As for the multicoloured *dhammadhvaja,* it is certainly 'imported'. It symbolizes the aura of the Buddha, the rays that are emitted from his body. This flag was created as a result of the revivalist Singhalese Buddhist movement. It was introduced by the committee that arranged the celebrations of the Buddha's anniversary in Colombo around 1880, probably under the influence of H.S. Olcott. It was presented to the public for the first time on 30 April 1885. It was later chosen as the Buddhist symbol by the World Fellowship of Buddhists conference in Colombo in 1950. Since then, the *dhammadhvaja* is an important symbol not only of the Singhalese Buddhists but also the international Buddhist community (Wimalaratne 1991; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 204). Ambedkar brought it to Maharashtra in 1950 after the conference in Colombo (Perera 1997: 23). Today, various Buddhist ritual manuals have standardized the *dhammadhvaja* (The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 99; Patil 1991: 60).

Hymns

Sacred hymns (*stotra*)[15] are dedicated to divinities and gods representing an ancient devotional genre of literature. Reciting a *stotra* is a religious act where the devotee surrenders himself to the divinity he adores. The content and structure of these *stotras* vary. Some of them enumerate the 'sacred' names of the venerated divinity; others consist of theological doctrines. These hymns are recited, in Sanskrit or any other vernacular languages, at any time of the day—while bathing in the morning, in a temple, or during the *puja*. They can be recited once or several times, in a group, or by a single person. The

devotee recites a text asking for protection or for material pleasures. The notion of *stotra* is not exclusively Hindu as it does exist in the Buddhist terminology where it designates a hymn that is addressed to the Buddha and the Buddhist divinities. It is difficult to distinguish clearly between *stotras*, *bhajanas*, and popular devotional chants (Bühnemann 1986: 5).

One of the most famous hymns dedicated to Ambedkar is the *Bhimastuti*, an anonymous Marathi text that is found in various Buddhist ritual manuals (Rahul Bodhi 1990: 185-6; The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 44; The Buddha Dhamma Education Society 1992). Some Buddhists asserted that they regularly recite this text during the *puja* or the *vandana* to Ambedkar. But I neither saw nor heard any Buddhist reciting this text. Here is a version, as presented by Dinabandhu (1993):

Homage to Bhima

You are a divine star,
you are the sage who brings happiness!
You are the jewel of the clan,
o Bhima, the king!

You are the omniscient master,
you are wisdom and the best companion!
You govern with the *dhamma*,[16]
o supreme sage!

O supreme excellence,[17]
sun of the weak and the distressed![18]
You are the true lord,
o head of the *sangha*![19]

You stood up and fought
in the battle of Chawdar
and you demolished the enemy!
O our Lord, you are revolution incarnate![20]

You showed us the path of liberation,[21]
you burned the old *Manusmriti*,
you enlightened the miserable,
o guiding star![22]

You created the Constitution,
you made India shine,
you are called *bodhisattva*,[23]
o, you are truly the one entitled to this name.

Take refuge to the Buddha,
take refuge to the *dhamma,*
take refuge to the *sangha*,
o Bhima, the king!

The language, structure and some imagery resemble the Hindu *stutis*. Similarly, the vocabulary is regal and luminous ('Lord', 'divine star', and so on). Ambedkar is described as the sun (*bhaskara*) of the weak and the oppressed. These also refer to the most important events in the history of the Buddhist movement like the battle of Chawdar, i.e. the *satyagraha* of Mahad. The fact that Ambedkar burnt the *Manusmriti* and replaced the ancient 'sacred' Hindu code by the new Constitution serves as a reminder here. At the same time, Ambedkar is commemorated for being essentially Buddhist, a *bodhisattva* who rules with the *dhamma*. In the last stanza of the hymn, the Three Refuges are recited in Marathi and Ambedkar is for the last time referred to as 'King Bhima'.

The *Bhimasmarana* (commemoration of Bhim), is an anonymous hymn in Pali dedicated to Ambedkar. It is found in various Buddhist ritual manuals (Pagare 1983: 121; The Buddha Dhamma Education Society 1992; The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 45). Here, once again Ambedkar is described as a hero in a very devotional language:

Commemorating Bhim

He is undisputedly knowledgeable and intelligent,
like a flame.
He is a divine being.
He is clairvoyant,
his voice is soft,
his body is fair and beautiful.

He is compassionate,
his is of a fearless nature,
and his mind is brave.

Renouncing power,
this virtuous man
follows the path of *dhamma.*

I commemorate Bhimrao.
I commemorate Bhimrao.
I commemorate Bhimrao.

The exact translation of this text is difficult because it is composed in hybrid Pali mixed with Marathi. The original Sanskrit and Marathi terms are 'pali-ized', adapted graphically and phonologically to the Pali norms. It is evident that this transformation is based more on the authors' creative imagination than on linguistic rules. Nevertheless, this text is remarkable because it shows to what extent the contemporary Buddhists have re-established Pali, a 'dead' language, as their new 'sacred' ritual language.

This text is also interesting as it abounds in symbols and references that belong to a common religious code followed by Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists. Images of the flame, divine and heroic characteristics, the almost-superhuman qualities and physical beauty are the standard points of a traditional *stuti*. In the previous paragraph, I had pointed out that the language of the hymns dedicated to Ambedkar resembles the devotional language of the Hindu *bhakti*. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that the elements of the new Buddhist religion follow the Hindu ritual forms like *anjali, puja, stuti and pranama.* Hence there is definitely an undoubted similarity between the religiosity of Hindus and Ambedkarite Buddhists. This observation nevertheless is contradictory to the conclusions of the previous chapter according to which the Buddhist discourse is characterized

Fig. 14: Ambedkar Jayanti in Pune, in 1997 (photograph by the author).

by an anti-Hindu radicalism, an anti-religious rationalism, a language of difference and a certain separatism. Before starting a detailed discussion on this difference in the discourse and its practical ramifications, some light needs to be thrown on some other observations.

COMMEMORATIONS, CEREMONIES, AND FESTIVALS

During my survey, I found that the most important Buddhist festivals are the birth, the conversion, and the death of Ambedkar. The anniversaries of the members of his family, like that of his father Ramji Sakpal and his first wife Ramabai, are also commemorated.[24] But these occasions cannot be compared to those festivals celebrated in Ambedkar's honour.

The importance and splendour of Ambedkar's birth anniversary on 14 April, distinguishes this event from any other. The Sanskrit-Marathi term *jayanti*, generally used to designate this occasion, indicates the enormous amount of respect for the person as well as its religious value. Ambedkar's anniversary is an official holiday in Maharashtra. Commemoration ceremonies are carried out everywhere. Every year, the President and the Vice-President of the Indian Republic honour Ambedkar's statue in front of Parliament. But it must be noted that these ceremonies are not always moments of joy or that they are celebrated peacefully.[25] These manifestations, that are moments of strength and weakness, of integration and marginality of the 'ex-untouchable' Buddhists, often lead to terrible mishaps. In fact, these festivals are not exclusively about carrying out 'religious' processions. Their political and social significance is equally great.

14 April in Pune

It is for this celebration that the innumerable local Buddhist organizations become active and organize lectures, dance performances, and other events. On this day, some people perform a *puja* at home to Ambedkar. Later, people gather in public places where cultural programmes are organized. The Ambedkar anniversary celebrations are more or less the same all over Maharashtra. On this festive occasion, each house is cleaned and then decorated; the kitchens are filled with the aroma of sweet dishes. Then the Buddhists wear new

Fig. 15: Ambedkar Jayanti in Nagpur (photograph by the author).

clothes and go to town to offer in procession garlands to the statue of Babasaheb.

Early in the morning, the Buddhists from Pune and the nearby villages go to the park dedicated to Ambedkar in the cantonment area. A big statue of Ambedkar stands at the centre of the park. Thanks to the ladder provided, the bust can be garlanded. There is small temple in a corner, with an altar. Numerous tents are set up outside the park where images, statues, and posters of Ambedkar are sold. Each organization has a stall. In the morning, people start climbing the ladder to put garlands around Ambedkar's neck (Fig. 15). This ceremony does not stop before night. Cars and trucks keep coming in incessantly from all the corners of Pune and the neighbouring villages carrying people and Ambedkar in papier maché or plaster. Musicians play; theatre groups perform; crowds of people meet here. People give public talks about Ambedkar and Buddhism. Processions are organized. People bring candles and incense sticks, touch the feet of the Ambedkar statue, make wishes, and offer prayers. Thus the anniversary resembles a fair (*jatra*). Everybody seems happy; small shops are set up everywhere selling posters, toys, and sweets. The most striking feature is the numerous stalls that distribute books and brochures.

Every year, a number of organizations and non-Buddhist parties mark this event by their presence and set up information centres.

The local committees of the National Defence Workers Union, The Central Bank Employees Congress, Samajik Samarasata Manch and the RSS put up programmes and adorn the statues with garlands. Politicians of the right wing and the left wing take this opportunity to show their admiration for Ambedkar. The BJP, the Shiv Sena, as well as other Hindu nationalist organizations, which the Buddhists normally consider their adversaries, are also present. Local representatives like the mayor and high-ranking government officials take part in this festival to show their respect. On 14 April 1997 Manohar Joshi, then chief minister of Maharashtra was present in Pune. He offered a garland of flowers to the statue and addressed the crowd (Fig. 14).[26]

Vijayadashami

The Buddhists celebrate the day when Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur as *Dhammacakrapravartana Dina* (the day when the wheel of *dhamma* was set to roll).[27] It is evident that Nagpur, a sacred site for pilgrimage (*pavitra tirthakshetra*), is the place for this celebration. Well-known Buddhists give lectures; people convert to Buddhism. It is also a festive occasion when one can enjoy and meet friends. For authors and publishers, it is an excellent opportunity to sell their books or even buy them.

Generally, these celebrations take place on the day of *Vijayadashami*, which is on the full moon day in the month of *ashvina*. Why not on the actual day that is 14 October? How can this coincidence of festive traditions be explained? Full moon days are considered auspicious and hence festivals as well as the anniversaries of gods, saints and important personalities are celebrated on a full moon day (*purnima*). On the other hand Ambedkar's birth and death anniversaries are celebrated according to the secular calendar. What explanation can be offered for this? In my opinion, *Vijayadashami* involves a conscious decision to make claims over the Hindu symbolic space. Ambedkar seems to have decided to convert himself on the occasion of *Vijayadashami* since it was on this very day that Ashoka had renounced violence and converted to Buddhism, having conquered Kalinga after a terrible war, and regretted the carnage. This day should therefore be celebrated as *Ashokavijayadashami*. In an explanation of the disappearance of the original significance it is said that the brahmans transformed it into a Hindu festival (Patil

1991: 58-9; Pagare 1983: 66; Shastri 1990: 18; Shastri 1959: 65). Thus celebrating the conversion of Ambedkar on the occasion of *Vijayadashami* signifies the rediscovery of the Buddhist past; the Mahars believe that they are the legitimate successors of the ancient Buddhists.

Mahaparinirvana Day

Dr Ambedkar died in Delhi on 6 December 1956. He was cremated the next day in Mumbai. The 6 December is commented as the *Mahaparinirvana Dina*, which indicates that Ambedkar attained *nirvana*. The commemoration site is called *Caityabhumi* and is situated in Dadar, close to Shivaji Park. Thousands of Buddhists from Mumbai and distant places gather here. They camp in the open air in Shivaji Park at Dadar, and pay homage to their leader in the stupa and on the Arabian Sea shore. Lectures, meetings, and various presentations are arranged. This is an occasion for people to meet, buy small souvenirs, posters and statues of Ambedkar, books, and jewellery. Music is played, speeches are delivered and plays are performed. In the evening, the beach is carpeted with lighted candles and flowers. A sixty-year-old Buddhist woman from the district of Beed says:

> As a child I heard a lot about Babasaheb Ambedkar. I never had the occasion of meeting him personally. He visited the big cities but never came to our village. We believe in him. I offer him prayers. In my family, we've always followed Buddhism. This is the first time that I've come to Mumbai. Until now I never felt the need since I don't have any relatives here. This time, it's different. I decided to visit *Caityabhumi* and so I left my work incomplete at home. But that doesn't matter as Ambedkar's *darshana* has given me pleasure. My husband and my son decided to stay at home. I have come here with my daughters-in-law, one of my grandchildren and seven relatives, all men. Men visit the *Caityabhumi* every year. But we women never get the opportunity to come here. No one even asks us. Or else I would have come here earlier. Unfortunately I didn't find a woman to accompany me. I finally managed to come. We've spent three days here and I know that I will come back next year.

Like her, thousands of people come every year by train, bus or car, to commemorate Ambedkar's death anniversary. There is a long queue outside the stupa, throughout the day, where thousands of people wish to have Babasaheb's *darshana*. Once the devotees enter

the stupa they take off their footwear and go to the altar where the photos, statues, and ashes stand. They attentively observe the various representations of the Buddha and Ambedkar, light candles, and bow. They recite ritual texts in Pali and make offerings. Then they turn around the altar in a clockwise direction. It is evident that for the Buddhists a visit to the stupa is an extraordinary experience. Arun Kamble, a Buddhist of Mahar origin, a library assistant in the University of Pune, says, 'On the 6 December, we celebrate Ambedkar's attainment of *nirvana*. On this occasion prayers are offered. I am going to see the *Caityabhumi*. In the stupa, I offer my faith (*shraddha*) to this great man (*mahamanava*) who made us Buddhists and initiated the social revolution. Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Buddha are our gods (*deva*).' The use of the term *nirvana* explicitly indicates the Buddhist nature of this festival. Kamble told me that he regularly offers prayers to the Buddha and Ambedkar, whom he considers Buddhist 'gods'. He offers them his faith and his trust. When I asked him what 'god' means to him, Kamble explained that the Buddha and Ambedkar are not 'exactly Buddhist gods', but they are 'like' gods. Before I could even judge his statement's value or its highly argumentative nature, he clarified that, for the Buddhists, the Buddha and Ambedkar are the highest and the absolute authorities and it is only in this sense that they are a 'sort of' gods. Kamble, knowing the atheist polemic of the activists, was well aware of the 'debatable' nature of his statement.

The anniversary of the Buddha

According to the Buddhist tradition, the full moon day in the month of *Vaishakha* (generally in May) is the day when the Buddha was born in Lumbini. Legend has it that he attained enlightenment on the same day when he was 35 years old. At the age of 80, he attained *nirvana*, again on the very same day. Today, this festival is celebrated in many Buddhist countries. In India, the commemoration ceremonies are organized by various Buddhist associations like the MBSI in Bodh Gaya, Delhi, Sarnath, Chennai, Sanchi, Kanchipuram and Kolkata.

Equally, present-day Buddhists in Maharashtra celebrate the full moon day in *Vaishakha* as the birth anniversary of the Buddha. The fact that many other Buddhists commemorate his enlightenment and his death on the same day is often ignored. Today, *Buddha Jayanti*

is celebrated individually, in the home. A Buddhist working man, aged 52, explains how he celebrates this occasion: 'I celebrate the Buddha's anniversary in the Indian way. I decorate the house with small electric lamps and ribbons. Sweet dishes are prepared. Then, we perform the *puja*. We invite friends and relatives.'

In the evening, small get-togethers are organized by different Buddhist organizations. Families go to the temple to offer prayers and attend lectures. In the temple, *vandana gitas* are collectively recited, reunions are held and songs on Babasaheb and Buddhism are sung. But the Buddha's anniversary is not a state holiday. There are no important public demonstrations like the ones on the occasion of the Ambedkar anniversary. People stay at home, prepare sweets; and enjoy them-selves. It is evident that the Buddhists consider the Buddha's anniversary as less important than that of Dr Ambedkar.

The Buddha and Ambedkar are not the only persons whose birth and death anniversaries are commemorated. The anniversaries of Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, his wife, are celebrated on 20 February and 2 January. There are others who commemorate the event that took place on 25 December 1927: the burning of the *Manusmriti* at Mahad. Twenty-eight years later, in 1955, Ambedkar inaugurated a Buddhist temple in Dehu on the very same day; another occasion to get together and reminisce the 'glorious' past, year after year.

An event that cannot go unnoticed is the day, 1 January, on which hundreds of Mahars go to the battlefield of Koregaon, a small village 30 kilometres from Pune. It was here that some twenty odd British soldiers fought against the Peshwas with the help of 600 Mahars for more than twelve hours.[28] The monument, built by the British to commemorate their victory, has now become a site of pilgrimage. Hundreds of Buddhists visit this site each year. They go there and stay over-night. To understand the symbolic importance of this day, we need to consider the fact that for the Buddhists the British were more of liberators than oppressors. The upper castes were considered to be more tyrannical than the colonial rulers.[29] Whatever be the historical facts, the Buddhists have good memories of the British as they contributed to the emancipation of the untouchables. They established schools and universities and hence promoted education (cf. Bagul 1992: 278), whereas the Peshwas are associated with extreme oppression and discrimination. The fact that the Mahars were prohibited from entering Pune between 3 p.m. and 9 a.m. in order

to prevent the possibility of their shadows touching the brahmans represents an indelible experience of suffering and humiliation (Robertson 1938: 73; Shelke 1991: 26). In Pune, the Buddhists still talk about how the Mahars were not allowed to even let their spittle mix with that of the others. They had to carry a pot and a broom with them.

Inventing a Buddhist calendar

Some Buddhists have arranged the days of festivals and commemorations in a formal Buddhist calendar. A calendar bought in Pune on 14 April 1999 is an excellent example. The title is *Krantiparva* (revolutionary days) and it contains photographs of Ambedkar and various texts like the Twenty-two Vows, Buddhist verses, and the addresses of important Buddhist institutions in Maharashtra along with the calendar.

The most interesting point is that it provides a particular dating system. The calendar starts on 14 April, the anniversary of Ambedkar, but follows the pattern of solar months of the Gregorian calendar. In other words, the year starts on 14 April and ends on

TABLE 3: THE TWELVE MONTHS OF THE BUDDHIST YEAR

Gregorian months	Buddhist terminology
April	Siddhartha
May	Ananda
June	Upali
July	Ashoka
August	Kanishka
September	Nagarjuna
October	Dipankara
November	Nagasena
December	Mahendra
January	Gautami
February	Sanghamitra
March	Chandramani

Source: *Krantiparva 1999*, a calendar with the 'revolutionary days in 1999', co-edited by P.G. Mali and C. Degelurakar, published by Rajamudra Prakashan in Auragabad and by Guru Ravidas Prakashan in Nanded.

TABLE 4: THE SEVEN DAYS OF THE BUDDHIST WEEK

Days of the week	Traditional Marathi terminology	New Buddhist terminology
Sunday	Ravivara	Kushinaravara
Monday	Somavara	Bhimavara
Tuesday	Mangalavara	Lumbinivara
Wednesday	Buddhivara	Bodhisattavara
Thursday	Guruvara	Dikshavara
Friday	Shukravara	Dhammacakravara
Saturday	Shanivara	Shravastivara

Source: *Krantiparva 1999*.

13 April. In this way the month of April remains incomplete. This calendar does not follow the traditional Marathi calendar of festivals, which is a lunar calendar. Neither does it follow the Buddhist calendar that is used in Sri Lanka. This calendar seems even more interesting as the months are named after places, kings, disciples or renowned scholars from the ancient Buddhist history. Mahaprajapati Gautami was the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, Ananda and Upali were his disciples; Ashoka and Kanishka were kings, Nagarjuna and Nagasena were Buddhist scholars; Dipankara is the Buddha who preceded Shakyamuni Gautama. Mahendra is the son and Sanghamitra the daughter of the King Ashoka.

Not only the months but also the weekdays have been named anew. Only Monday and Thursday have an explicit and immediate connotation regarding Ambedkar. The other days commemorate important historic places of the Buddha like Kushinara, Lumbini and Shravasti (Fig. 8). Similarly, the title of *bodhisattva*, and the wheel of *dhamma* are commemorated. The anniversaries of Ramji Sakpal, Ramabai Ambedkar, Kabir, Shahu Maharaj, Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, Anand Kausalyayan, Annabhau Sathe as well as that of Periyar are commemorated.

This calendar is interesting and innovative. Like the Buddhist discourse mentioned herein, it manifests an obvious will to affirm the Buddhist specificities and differences, in space and time, in relation to other communities. Buddhists have created for themselves a specific ritual tradition that is distinguished from the other communities by its terminology, Western (Secular) months, and

festivals. But does it have any impact? The fact that a Buddhist calendar has been created implies that it is this calendar that will be used, not a Hindu one.

During the course of my study, I came across three types of behaviour patterns and practices. The first type is the most purist one. The activists declare that the Buddhists should not participate in any Hindu festival like Dipavali or Nagapanchami. They categorically abstain from it and ask their comrades not to follow the ancient tradition (Danda and Samanta 1993: 269; Waghmare 1995: 217; Fitzgerald 1993: 34). Pillai-Vetschera (1994: 195) cites a myth according to which the festival of Holi is an affront to the Buddhists as the brahmans, after the Buddha's death, had stolen his body to be able to rejoice his cremation. They even forced the Buddhists to participate in this terrible ceremony. Thus for the brahmans, Holi represents the symbolic defeat of Buddhism. Thus, any participation in this festival is considered an act of betrayal. However, the entire Buddhist community does not have this separatist or rigid attitude.

The Buddhists of the second type openly affirm their participation in all kinds of religious festivals. These Buddhists celebrate Hindu festivals while differentiating between the religious and cultural aspects of such an event, with no controversies involved. A festival like Dipavali is considered a social event that may be celebrated by a Buddhist without compromising his religious identity. These festivals are above all festive moments of joy. As a matter of fact, in the interviews, I was always told that one should be kind to one's neighbours and try to build friendly and strong relations with the Hindus in order to create social harmony. At the same time these people do not forget their Buddhist identity. A 48-year-old Buddhist, married and father of three children, who works in the University of Pune, says: 'We don't really celebrate Hindu festivals. We just prepare some sweets for our children.' Similarly a Buddhist who works in the administrative department of the University of Pune emphasizes that he participates 'just like that', without taking part in the religious ceremonies. He says, 'I go for the celebrations if I am invited. They are my friends. I go to them but I don't participate in the *puja*.'

Then there is the third and last kind of attitude which is the most interesting one. These Buddhists celebrate Hindu festivals as if they were actually Buddhist festivals. For example, Haribhau Pagare (1983: 66-8), in his manual of Buddhist rituals, explains that the festivals of

Dipavali and Holi mark the arrival of a new season and hence the Buddhists should participate in them. He also claims that the festival of Nagapanchami was originally a festival of the Nagas who were Buddhists. In this way a few ancient festivals have been appropriated as Buddhist festivals and the ancient customs have obtained a new significance. This attempt contributes more to the conceptualization of Buddhism as a distinct religious tradition, different from Hinduism. On the whole, this discourse from time to time manifests highly separatist tendencies, that could be judged as 'fundamentalist'.

Critical voices

Dr Ambedkar was opposed to the celebration of his anniversary with pomp, a practice that had existed at least since 1940, well before his conversion to Buddhism. In 1941, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, Ambedkar called on his followers to stop organizing such ceremonies. He announced: 'You have been celebrating my birthday for some fifteen years past. I have never attended them. I have always been opposed to them. You have celebrated my golden jubilee now; let that be enough. Let there be no more celebrations' (Kunte 1982: 251). D.R. Waghmare (1995: 196) has severely criticized the fact that Ambedkar's anniversary has been transformed into a cult of a hero. Yeshwant Manohar, a famous Dalit author and Professor of Marathi at the University of Nagpur, airs his views in an interview: 'There are no religious festivals in Buddhism. We celebrate Doctor Ambedkar's birth anniversary to express our gratitude to him. We organize reunions with friends to discuss the current situation. We seriously try to come up with ways to promote social progress.'

Manohar denies the existence of Buddhist religious festivals and uses the secular term *janma* instead of *jayanti* to designate Ambedkar's birth. But most Buddhist's use the word *jayanti*. The ritual manuals edited by the monks Rahul Bodhi (1990: 182) and Sadanand (1979: 85), enumerate the Ambedkarite festivals as *bauddha sana* or *bauddhance sane*. This implies that Manohar's opinion is rather an appeal to the community to commemorate Dr Ambedkar's anniversary less religiously. According to him, this event should be look upon as only an occasion to discuss politics and express gratitude to Ambedkar, without rituals, fairs, and superstitions. The 'true' followers of Ambedkar would concentrate more on the ideological struggle and condemn futile expenditure and the superficial nature

of this kind of celebrations. A tract named *Without Paying Price—Social Change Not Possible*, and distributed by members of the association BAMCEF, in Pune on 14 April 1995, says:

> Today, we can see how Doctor Ambedkar's anniversary is celebrated with a lot of enthusiasm and joy throughout the country. This festival has acquired so much of importance that it has taken a dangerous turn. Theoretically, Doctor Ambedkar's anniversary is celebrated to commemorate the movement and his ideology. But today, it is only the festive aspect that counts. This festival is celebrated only for a day and for the rest of the year we forget this great man. . . . Every year Doctor Ambedkar's followers spend hundreds of thousands of rupees on his *jayanti* celebrations and think that it is their duty. . . . We could save huge sums and divert them towards our movement. There would be no need to ask our enemies for alms. . . . Doctor Ambedkar has shown his followers a direction: 'Do not venerate me. You should accomplish the objective, which I fought for my entire life'. But today none of his followers are seen working towards this objective. On the contrary, they seem to be engrossed in worshipping him. This attitude puts our enemies in a stronger position to destroy the movement launched by Phule and Ambedkar.

A point to be noted is that the author mentions Phule and Ambedkar without adding the usual titles like Mahatma, Bharat Ratna or Babasaheb. Like him, many activists call upon Ambedkar's followers to concentrate on the struggle against inequality and to fight for social change. They accuse the masses of accepting Buddhism passively, at the level of ritual. To bring about a change in the thinking of society, all 'superficial' rituals and idol worship should be given up. These views show the rationalist aspects of the Buddhist discourse. This is the very spirit that questions all religious devotion which I have already mentioned.

RITES OF PASSAGE

According to the Hindu tradition, an individual's life is structured by *samskaras* (sacraments, rites of passage), among others, birth, 'name giving' (*namakarana*), initiation, marriage, and death. Similarly, the life of the Buddhists of Mahar origin is marked by *samskaras* that existed well before their conversion. Today, these practices have acquired a new signification and a new Buddhist symbolic reference. The people who carry them out do so in a presumed Buddhist way and as Buddhists. These rites prove decisive

in confirming Buddhist identity. A 36-year-old Buddhist, married and father of two children, an employee at the University of Pune explains: 'How do I consider myself Buddhist? Well, I have carried out my marriage and the birth rites of my child while reciting the Five Precepts.' The Buddhist identity manifests itself explicitly in the rites of passage. If not all, a majority of Buddhists perform more or less the same rites. There is a relatively stable norm for the numerous ceremonies celebrated in the house or outside, in a public hall or in a tent. Generally, a sort of altar, decorated with a statue of the Buddha, a picture of Ambedkar, a pot, some coconuts, candles, and incense sticks, is installed in front of the guests. During these ceremonies ritual verses are recited.

From birth to scholarisation

After the birth of a child, the *namakarana* rite, a ceremony where he/she is named, is organized. The child is thus integrated into the society and the family at a particular time. This ceremony is considered as the first *samskaras* in the life of a Buddhist. It goes back to a ritual that the Mahars practised before their conversion (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 69-71). This ceremony is generally organized within the first five weeks after the baby's birth. The house has to be cleaned, the parents wear white clothes, and pictures and statues of the Buddha and Ambedkar are set up. Flowers and fruits are offered to the effigies; candles are lit and incense sticks burnt. The Three Refuges, the Five Precepts and the *suttas* are recited in Pali. Often, the baby's parents invite a *bhikshu*, a Dhammachari or a *bauddhacarya* and typically 'Buddhist' names are chosen for the babies. The ritual manuals often list the names of the most 'important' legendary heroes as Rahul, Sumedh, Gautam, Milind, Subhadra or Nagasen (Pagare 1983: 102-3; The Bauddha Dhamma Education Society 1992). Some names for girls are Sujata, Gautami, Mahamaya, Amrapali and Vaishali. The names of Hindu gods and goddesses like Lakshmi and Ganga are purposely avoided.

Some celebrate the first haircut of a baby (*jayavala kapane* or *kesha kapane*) when the baby's hair is offered to the temple (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 71-2). Some others celebrate the *kana tocane* ceremony, when a baby's ears are pierced.

The *vidyarambha* is the ceremony that marks the commencement of a child's education. This rite is performed when the child is 5 or

6 years old, the day the child is admitted into school. It is performed in the house, in a public place, or in a temple, depending on the number of children involved. In the poor and marginalized families, education for children remains, though it might be difficult to realize, a crucial part of the Buddhist discourse.

Initiation into the sangha

Among the Buddhists in Maharashtra, before becoming a *bhikkhu*, some perform an initiation rite that goes back to the Buddhist Theravada tradition. That is the initiation of *shramanera* (novice). This Buddhist institution has always been alive in Thailand and Burma. However, a majority of the young novices do not wish to become monks and spend a very limited time with the monastic community (Harvey 1990: 220). This custom is essentially a rite of passage and not the institutionalized recruitment of monks. In Maharashtra the Buddhist youth of today look upon the custom as an occasion to learn about Buddhism. A Buddhist, 52 years of age, an employee in Pune and a BSI activist says: Each year, we organize a camp for the novices (*shramanera shibira*). This seminar, organized to introduce the students to Buddhism, is spread over 15 days at the time of Buddhapurnima. There are about 30 to 35 participants. This is benevolent work.' Young boys of Mahar origin get together to spend two weeks together. They shave their head, dress like *bhikkhus* and learn the basics of Buddhism and meditation (Fig. 16). Their teachers are monks or lay Buddhist activists. However, the entire Buddhist community in Maharashtra does not practise this initiation. This ceremony can be carried out only with the support of a Buddhist association that can recruit teachers, arrange for funds and gather necessary material.

Marriage

Marriage is undoubtedly the most important social institution in the life of a Buddhist. The parents of the girl, with the help of relatives or an association, look for a suitable husband. Then, they contact the parents of the future husband and invite them over. It is here that the boy and the girl see each other for the first time. The girl, dressed in a beautiful saree, offers tea and some sweets. The parents discuss the education, bio-data, hobbies, and professional aims of

both. Each one observes the other and tries to judge the social status. Do they match the expectations one has about a matrimonial alliance? If the boy's parents like the girl then they invite the girl and her parents to their house. Then the engagement ceremony is organized. This day is celebrated like a party; relatives and friends are invited and the future couple is presented to the guests. Verses in Pali are recited and a *puja* is performed in honour of Ambedkar and the Buddha. The fathers embrace each other and each offers a garland of flowers to the other. This ceremony, publicly performed, announces the approval of the parents for the marriage and thus, social relations are created officially.

Finally the marriage ceremony takes place after a lot of organization, preferably in March, April or May. For the parents, this function is important and expensive as many relatives and friends are invited. Even though the ceremonies differ according to the social status of the parents, they share some common traits. In the marriage hall, pictures of the Buddha and Babasaheb Ambedkar, Buddhist symbols like the *dharmacakra* and the *svastika* are put up. The names of the bride and the bridegroom are written in big letters on a streamer that is visible to every body. Usually, the couple wears white clothes, a symbol of purity and simplicity. The ritual is performed in the auspicious presence of a *bhikkhu*, a *bauddhacraya* or a *dhammacari*. These 'specialists' recite ritual verses and bless the married couple. The ceremony ends with an exchange of garlands. The invitees participate by showering flowers on the couple. Then the guests congratulate the newly weds and give them bouquets of flowers and click photographs with them. A sumptuous meal is finally served.

In some marriages, a sort of contract of duties is made. It is recited by the couple or the person who supervises the ritual ceremony.[30] The five duties of the husband (*patici kartavye*) are: respect your wife, do not insult her, do not misbehave in front of her (do not consume alcohol and do not commit adultery), provide her with food, and shower her with jewellery and garments. The five duties of the wife (*patnici paca kartavye*) are: take care of your house, treat all the members of your family—parents, aged people and the servants—kindly and politely, abstain from adultery, protect your husband's wealth, and carry out your household duties. This contract tries to distribute the rights and duties equally among the couple.

Buddhists claim that the marriage ceremony has become more

humane and simple after their conversion to Buddhism. Hence, the 'Hindu' tradition has been completely abolished. Similarly, child marriages and marriages between old men and young girls have also been abolished. Moreover, the Buddhist marriage ceremonies are less expensive. Daya Pawar says: 'Today the marriage ceremony of the Mahars is of one or two hours. After having recited the Five Precepts and the Three Refuges, the sermon takes place and then, the ceremony is over' (Pawar 1996: 174). This remark remains rhetorical as urban Buddhists, those who come from the new middle class, organize more and more ostentatious ceremonies. Multiple details are added to make the ritual more refined. Marriage is, in fact, a social event. The ceremony often takes place in expensive places rented by the bride's parents, and a sumptons meal is offered. Another questionable point is that it is often said that a horoscope (*kundali*) will not be used in a Buddhist marriage, whereas many Buddhists refer to the horoscope before accepting a marriage proposal. Similarly, the date for a Buddhist wedding ceremony is not chosen randomly. Some days are considered more auspicious than the others. Generally, these days of good omen are chosen according to an astrologer's advice.

As for dowry, all over India this issue is surrounded by controversy. Some Mahars used to have the *dejabhoja* (the bride price), a practice according to which the bridegroom's family offers money and clothes to the bride's family (Wilkinson 1972; Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 88). Shantabai Kamble, in her autobiography, talks about how her husband paid sixty rupees for her (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 77). But this custom is disappearing. Among the Buddhists, who claim a higher social status, the dowry practice is common even though law in India bans it. The bride's parents offer 'small gifts', like a gold watch, jewellery, an apartment, or a car, to the bridegroom.

The last rites

The cremation ceremony (*antyasamskara*) is the last and a very important *samskara* in a man's life. This ritual constitutes homage to the deceased, putting an end to the mourning period. The Mahars traditionally buried their dead. According to Daya Pawar (1996: 158), the Mahars discarded the old custom and started cremating the deceased, which is a custom that belongs to 'higher' classes, only

after Dr Ambedkar's death. Besides the social status the other factor involved is money. The choice of burial or cremation depends on the financial conditions of the deceased's family (Danda and Samanta 1993: 277). Obviously, cremation costs more than burial. Using cakes of dry cow dung makes the ceremony less expensive and simple, but cremation using wood costs much more.

In Pune, I witnessed a number of cremations. The method consistently remains the same. The body is bathed and perfumed at home. Relatives and friends are immediately informed, and they gather at the home of the deceased. After some time they carry the body to the cremation site. Here, a funeral pyre is arranged and the body is placed on it. Generally, the family members or another respectable person see the ceremony through. Up to this point, this ritual is not different from the Hindu one. The choice between a burial and a cremation is not particular to the Buddhists. In fact, if Buddhists who cannot afford a cremation ceremony opt for a burial, so do the poor Hindus. The visible difference is that, during a Buddhist cremation, all the people gathered recite the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts in Pali. Preferably it is the elder son who sets the pyre on fire. The ashes are collected the next day and thrown into a river. The fact that the family and friends of the deceased recite the *paritta*, *trisharana* and the *pancashila*, certainly gives the funerary ritual a redemptive aspect.[31]

The commemoration rite (*punyanumodana*) of the deceased takes place on the seventh, tenth, twelfth, or thirteenth day after the death. A feast is organized in his honour and a *puja* is performed. In one way or the other, this tradition existed even before the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism (Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 138-40). This ancient Hindu custom is re-appropriated by the new Buddhists.

All said and done, what are the Buddhist beliefs about death? It is interesting how this question is avoided in most of the interviews, poems, and songs. It was, in fact, difficult to question a Buddhist on this topic. Some people were evasive when asked about it. Others admitted that this question had never been asked. From time to time I heard about a Buddhist heaven. After death, the soul becomes a *buddhavasi*, which means that it lives within the Buddha. The 'rationalist' Buddhists, who do not accept any religious beliefs, answer in a very straightforward manner that they believe in Ambedkar and his ideas of rebirth.

RITUAL, DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

I have not conducted a detailed study about how the rituals are practised by the Buddhists in Maharashtra, because my objective is to analyse the Buddhist discourse as an expression of the fight for emancipation and autonomy. This chapter covers, above all, the Buddhist rituals that manifest the difference. Hence the ritual practices were mainly discribed in relation to the Buddhist discourse, which either legitimized them or contradicted them. This discourse has spread among the Buddhist masses through associations and the *bhikkhusangha*, a fact that will be dealt with in the following chapter. In other words, the debates on the standardization of the Buddhist rituals are linked to the institutionalization of the Buddhist movement. Various organizations offer their services to organize camps for novices and meditation classes. They supervise marriage ceremonies and funerary rituals in their areas, in all the big cities in Maharashtra. This is how they contribute towards creating standard and uniform ritual practices.

In the previous paragraphs, two problems have emerged. On the one hand there is the debate between those Buddhists who believe in ritual practices and worshipping and those who do not. This problem, which concerns all modern religious movements, is not restricted to the Buddhist movement. The second problem is that of the Hindu influence on the new practices of Buddhism. Both arguments are interrelated and are controversial topics not only among Buddhists but also among scholars.

Rationalism and anti-ritualism

Many Buddhist scholars were interested mainly in philosophy and philology and have for a long time ignored the practical and ritual aspects of Buddhism. What lies at the root of these intellectual presumptions is the preference given to Buddhist texts, the 'true' Buddhism, and the ignorance of inscriptional and archaeological evidences. Staal (1985) and Schopen (1997) have stated that this form of Buddhism, essentially defined by its ethics, resembled Protestantism. Max Weber (1972: 220) thought that 'primitive' and 'original' Buddhism would have been pure and simple, a religion without any god or worship, an atheist philosophy. It was only

after some serious ethnological and philological studies that these ideas were dispelled. Gombrich (1991b), Gokhale (1974) and Schopen (1997) have shown that the ancient Buddhists did worship a number of semi-divine beings like the *devatas*, *nagas,* and *yakshas* along with the Buddha in specific religious shrines. Obeyesekere (1966) analysed the popular form of Buddhism practised in Sri Lanka and described how the Buddhists worship the local divinities and saints. Tambiah (1984b: 196) asserts that, in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists confer supernatural powers on amulets, pictures and statues.

In spite of all this the contemporary and modern Buddhist discourse has adopted an intellectual and anti-ritual attitude. Dharmapala (1926: 121) affirmed that Buddhism is free from theology, priesthood, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heaven and other sectarian doctrines. Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist scholar, shares the same view. In his introduction to Buddhism, published for the first time in 1961, he explains why Buddhism is fundamentally different from a religion that believes in the existence of god:

> A Buddhist is not obliged to perform any superficial rites and ceremonies. Buddhism is a way of life. What is important is to follow the Eightfold Noble Path. Naturally, there are simple and beautiful ceremonies in all the Buddhist countries . . . . The prayer practices of the countries that believe in theism should not be assimilated. It is only a way of rendering homage to the Master who has shown us the way. (Rahula 1978: 111-12).

In fact, this interpretation is typical of modern Buddhists who consider themselves as rationalist and scientific. A Buddhist does not believe in 'superficial' rituals and exaggerated godliness.[32] He does not worship idols, he renders homage to what the Buddha's image symbolizes, since Buddhist devotion is essentially a 'spiritual' exercise.[33] It is evident that Ambedkar shared more or less the same anti-ritual point of view as Dharmapala or Rahula. Buddhism, as propagated by him, is scientific and opposes any kind of sacrifices and sacred rituals. But Ambedkar's views seem ambiguous since he has published the *Bauddha Puja Patha*, a manual of Buddhist rites. In the preface, he explains that instead of asking him about the Buddhist philosophy many people asked him how *puja* is performed in the Buddhist religion (Ambedkar 1998b: 727). To satisfy their demand, he collected *gathas* in Pali and observed the rituals when he travelled to Sri Lanka. After the publication of this collection, various Buddhist associations published similar manuals on Buddhist rituals.

All these works reflect a need to solve the contradiction between religion and science. The authors justify the necessity of Buddhist rites by repeating that Buddhism is not based on 'superficial' rituals but on the purity of the soul, intelligence and science. In the manual of the Buddhist Society of India, it is said:

> Buddhist rites (*vidhi*), and ceremonies (*samskara*) were created since the common man felt the need to do so. Some of the rites and ceremonies mentioned in this book are practiced in various Buddhist countries. By accepting these, the *bodhisattva*, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, has maintained a scientific point of view that corresponds with the modern times. The objective of this book is also to link India to other Buddhist countries. (The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 21)

This passage is interesting because the authors are well aware of the contradictory nature of their opinions that refer simultaneously to modern science and ancient rituals. They legitimize the existence of Buddhist rituals on the basis of an ordinary man's need and emphasize that these rituals are nevertheless scientific and compatible with the modern era. Moreover, these authors defend themselves by stating that these rites exist in other Buddhist countries as well.

On a more radical note, D.R. Waghmare (1995: 229-46) criticises all kinds of rituals and prayers as an expression of blind faith and superstition. He slanders the Buddhists who recite verses for protection from famine and disease. He cites examples of Buddhists being possessed by Ambedkar (Waghmare 1995: 195). Neither the Buddha nor Ambedkar would have permitted this kind of rite. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism does not approve of sacred books (*pothi*), eulogy (*stuti*), worship (*puja-arca*), fairs (*jatra*), processions (*yatra*) or rites (*vidhi*). If the Buddhists do not discard these traditions, they will always remain Mahars (*maharamaya bauddha*) and kill the Buddhist movement. The radical rationalist wave refuses all forms of religious worship and reproaches the ignorant for being blind followers of Ambedkar. However, this rationalism is manifest only among the elite, since the ignorant and the illiterate practise religious worship. A Buddhist, principal of a college in Dhule, explains:

> I pay homage to Doctor Ambedkar. It is a delicate issue since he did not like rituals. But I pay him homage because he showed us the right path. I even bow down before the Buddha to show my respect for him. But I do not ask for any gifts. If a Hindu goes to a temple, he expects something in return. He wishes to earn more money, a better position in society etc. he makes a sacrifice and offers flowers. The *puja* is a tradition that should be

abandoned. But firstly, the illiterate must be given education. If they remain ignorant, Buddhism would not be any different from Hinduism since they practice non-Buddhist rituals. Consequently, people criticize us saying that 'what you follow is not Buddhism at all'.

The 'enlightened' Buddhists claim that they do not practice 'religious' and 'superficial' rituals and assert that they do not believe in supreme powers. There are others who practise rituals and justify them on the basis of their scientific nature. In other words, they pay homage to Ambedkar and the Buddha and emphasize that they were human beings. In fact, the term used to designate this act of veneration is a debatable issue. The term *prarthana*, which signifies 'request', 'supplication' and 'prayer', is avoided because of its immediate superstitious connotation. According to the rationalist Buddhists, the term *vandana* that signifies 'salutation' or 'homage' would be more appropriate. Though ritual manuals are still called *Bauddha Puja Patha* (The Buddha Dhamma Education Society 1992; Dinabandhu 1993; Shinde 1999) others follow this advice (Bodhisagar and Vimalkirti 1994; Vanshiv 1999). Gombrich (1991a: 73n) explains that in the context of Sinhalese Buddhism, *vandana* designates more a sign of honour than an act of religious worship. A Buddhist, 50 years of age and an employee with the Pune municipality, explains in detail the difference between the two terms: 'I do not believe in prayers (*prarthana*). I do the *vandana.* There is a large difference between the two. Since we do not believe in the existence of god, we do not pray. *Vandana* means "*namaskara*", it means to join hands to express respect for any person, it could be the Buddha, Doctor Ambedkar, Phule or anybody. Since the Buddhists do not believe in god or in any divine force that comes to their help, the term *prarthana* is eliminated from their vocabulary.'

A young 24-year-old employee of the TBMSG confirms: 'The idea of praying, designated by the term *prarthana*, is not Buddhist. Nothing can be obtained through prayers. It is just a matter of religious faith (*shraddha*).[34] Buddhists should avoid using the term *prarthana* since they consider the Buddha just as a role model (*adarsha*).' Zelliot (1992a: 224) finds also that the Buddhists offer neither prayers nor *puja* to Ambedkar or the Buddha, and, it is in this way that the Buddhist ritual practices differ from those of the Hindus. This conclusion seems exaggerated as she ignores the difference between ideology and practice. The various ritual practices

mentioned do not abide by the restrictions set by the 'rationalist' and 'enlightened' Buddhists. Even if only the discourse is taken into consideration, Zelliot's conclusion is faulty as she ignores the diversity of the opinions mentioned throughout this chapter, which indicates that the rules regarding the use of terms are not rigid enough. The terms like *bauddha puja, buddha puja* and *prarthana* appear in various ritual manuals and in a number of songs on Ambedkar.[35]

Ritual norms and exclusivism

The second problem, which stems from the first, is that of implementing a Buddhist ritual norm, pure and exclusive. In his famous Twenty-two Vows, Ambedkar explicitly instructs the converted Buddhists to stop worshipping Hindu deities. In spite of this, many Buddhists do so even today, and follow, more or less consciously, the old traditions. This is not a new discovery. Shastree (1996: 82), in her study on the Buddhists in Pune shows how the 'Hindu' customs have outlived the conversion to Buddhism. Similarly Burra (1996: 158), who studied a village in Beed district in Maharashtra, observed that in each house she visited, Hindu gods and goddesses were placed beside images of the Buddha and Dr Ambedkar. She discovered that a little more than half the people interviewed admitted that they performed *puja* to Hindu gods, and the majority of them went on a pilgrimages (*yatra*) and practised the ceremony of *shraddha* to venerate the ancestors. Burra (1996: 160) concludes that these Buddhists do not understand the spiritual aspect of Buddhism. From an occidental Buddhist perspective, Pilchick (1988: 171) criticizes the Buddhist 'syndrome' of keeping representations of Hindu deities in the house.

This debate is not restricted to ethnologists and occidental Buddhists. The co-existence of different faiths is also a controversial topic for the Maharashtrian Buddhist community. I have already mentioned some examples of people trying to hide the fact that they worshipped their family gods or some other gods in their kitchens. I have also mentioned how, when this practice was discovered, it led to furious discussions and awkward reactions. A particular example is significant. In Pune, I observed the cremation ceremony of an old man. At the cremation site, the widow wanted to perform some rites that according to the others belonged to the Hindu

tradition. She wanted to put some drops of water in his mouth before the cremation. Some people protested. After an intense discussion, all the people present finally decided to let the lady perform the rite. But they emphasized that it would be against Buddhism and that they conceded only out of respect for the widow. This interesting reaction indicates that there is an ongoing conceptual differentiation among Buddhists.

Shastree (1996: 71) observes that some Buddhists wanted to hide the fact that they were married according to Hindu rites. Waghmare (1995: 230) confirms that some Buddhists celebrate Hindu festivals on the sly. Actually, these people are afraid of public pressure. A new ritual norm has been established and some activists supervise its implementation. Geetabai Bhagat, a 55-year-old Buddhist, tells us that, along with some other women, she denounced all women who performed the *puja* to worship the goddess, pulling them by their hair (Moon and Pavar 1989: 210). Following the Hindu tradition is considered to be scandalous. Baby Kamble says:

> You, your knowledgeable generation of today, you have completely thrown Babasaheb out of your lives, Babasaheb who has done so much for you . . . . On the fourth day after the full moon, on Saturdays and Thursdays, you fast. You familiarize your children with Ganapati, Lakshmi and other divinities. Since when are you wasting your energy on banging your foreheads on the steps of shrines, whereas not one god has ever had the courtesy of showing some pity? (Kamble and Kamble 1991: 260)

Baby Kamble declares that Bhim has made the Mahars what they are today and that worshipping gods would mean betraying him. This intense appeal proves, once again, that the distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism, as proclaimed by Ambedkar, does not necessarily correspond with the perception of all Buddhists. Kamble is close to the views of Shastree and Burra who suggest that 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' are two distinct religious systems. Similarly, both scholars suppose that Buddhists should follow Ambedkar's ideas and take on his conception of Buddhism. This separatist differentiation between Hinduism and Buddhism demands understanding and conceptualizing the 'essence' of the two religions. However, many of the Buddhists are not aware of this essentials difference, they know very little about this 'intellectual' Buddhism. They perform rituals to worship the goddess without realizing the problem.

SUMMARY

It is clear that in spite of the anti-Hinduism and the anti-ritualism asserted in the Buddhist discourse, some people, urban and rural, continue to venerate 'Hindu' deties like Mariai (Fitzgerald 1993: 32; Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 150-5). A young Buddhist from Nagpur explains that all the religions, in some way, would be the same. Hence she adores all manifestations of god, Hindu, Christian, or Buddhist: 'I participate in the festivals of all the religions. I think religion should not act as a barrier between men. I also go to Hindu temples.'

Yet we must explain the apparently contradictory fact that the same religious community practises rituals that belong to different religious worlds. The first key to this paradox is provided by Gombrich. He highlights the fact, more than once, that the Buddhists have the right to worship various local gods, this being neither an act of syncretism, nor a 'non-orthodox' behaviour pattern, nor an 'inconsequential' jest. According to him, Buddhism is a theist religion. The co-existence of the ultimate authority of the Buddha and the other various gods and divinities does not contradict the Buddhist doctrine of redemption. These gods are extremely powerful beings and are worshipped for worldly pleasures. In other words, Buddhism is exclusively concerned with the salvation of an individual (Gombrich 1991a: 54-5; 1991b: 24). Hence, a Buddhist can worship the goddess without having to renounce the Buddha or Ambedkar. If this thesis of Gombrich is correct, it poses a different problem for the Ambedkarite Buddhists, it says that venerating the Buddha does not necessarily mean abandoning the Hindu gods. Gombrich's would be strongly criticized by the Ambedkarite Buddhists.

To gain a better insight into this apparent contradiction, another even more important point needs to be mentioned. It may be suggested that these rituals are not necessarily associated with superstructures and belief systems. According to Staal, Hinduism and Buddhism are characterized by the fact that the practice of rituals is more important than belief or doctrine. According to him, 'it is particularly evident that rituals have very little or nothing at all to do with the ideology and beliefs, that they are passed on without interpretation and that they are practiced for the sake of it' (Staal 1985: 28). Staal concludes that the rituals 'are invariably the same in different religions' since the same rites are found 'under Vedic, Hindu

or Buddhist forms not only in India but in China, Japan, Tibet and Indonesia as well' (Staal 1985: 28). He concludes that in India, Hinduism and Buddhism very often overlap.

This is how the Mahars who have converted to Buddhism and practise Hindu rituals justify the fact that rituals are a more fundamental aspect than the newly adopted religion. Staal opines that it is impossible to believe in different realities unless these are in conformity with each other. But, without many restrictions being imposed, it is easy to follow different practices. In fact, the Ambedkarite Buddhists find it difficult to separate themselves from Hinduism, particularly as far as rituals are concerned. The language of devotion and the paradigms of *bhakti* characterize the prayers they offer to Ambedkar. Such recitation and *puja* cannot be classified as activities that belong to either Buddhism or Hinduism, but are practices that need to be performed repeatedly according to precise rules that have already been established. The function of a religious doctrine, Hindu and Buddhist, is precisely to attribute a signification to these rituals.

Staal's thesis is pertinent. It appears to solve our problem, since it is evident that people practise certain rituals without giving their Buddhist signification a thought. For them, it is enough to just perform these rituals. Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Hindus, all alike, decorate new vehicles with flowers, break coconuts, and burn incense sticks.

An example may justify this phenomenon. Most Buddhists recite the Pali *parittas* without knowing the literal meaning of the words. In Nagpur, I came across an illiterate old lady who knew a considerable number of Pali texts by heart. She did not understand my question on the signification of what she recited or its translation in Marathi. She definitely knew a little about these texts. For her, these texts were above all 'sacred' verses that had to be regularly recited. Knowing their translations or literary 'meaning' was not necessary. Yet she was well aware that the recitation had some meaning. It is through the recitation of the verses that their protective function is invoked. Thus, it is not necessary to know the exact Marathi translation of the *parittas*. To perform rituals of this genre, it is enough to recite the words aloud. Even Ambedkar's works have become prone to this ritualization. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, considered a sacred book, is recited in a group at a particular time of the day (Waghmare 1995: 237). In the earlier paragraphs I focused

on literary meaning and content of texts. In order to avoid a series of misunderstandings I underline now the notion of *performance*. Is the recitation of a Buddhist *paritta* not comparable to the recitation of a *mantra*? It would involve the complex concept of *shabda*, 'sound', which is not an effect or result of something, but the creation and the cosmos itself.

However, it is difficult to accept the radicalism in Staal's thesis. Staal (1985: 28) affirms for example that rituals, be they Buddhist or Hindu, are identical. But how does a *puja* to the goddess resemble the *puja* to Ambedkar? Can rituals be identical despite the fact that the symbolic framework is completely different? Hoisting a flag (*dhvajarohana*) is a ritual practised by the Buddhists as well as the RSS activists. However, the ritual is distinguished by the ideological ramifications that are too important to be neglected. The Buddhists hoist the *dhammadhvaja* and the others the saffron flag. These flags are completely different since the one symbolizes Buddhism and the other Hindu nationalism. In my opinion, a ritual has to be studied within its contextual framework and in accordance with the multiple meanings conferred by the adherents.

Moreover, Staal's thesis is contradicted by the discontinuities, oppositions, and ritual innovations that have been presented in this chapter. Certain contradictions are seen uniquely at the ideological level, e.g. the terminological distinction between *vandana* and *prarthana*. But there are other prominent changes in the practices. New Buddhist rites have been invented and those disqualified as Hindu are abandoned. However, these innovations, oppositions and differentiation are not characteristic of the whole Buddhist community. I have described how the activists have attributed a specific discursive signification to certain rituals. I have not dealt with the Buddhist 'masses', for whom precise religious signification of certain rituals is not evident. However, it should be noted that the so-called elite does not constitute isolated individuals but is a part of the movement. Whether representative or not, the discourses and ritual practices of the elite negate Staal's thesis which suggests that rituals remain the same in spite of the religious conversions.

I also think that the idea according to which it is not possible to believe in different realities unless they are in conformity with each other is misleading. People follow not only different practices but different realities as well. Multiple identities, compartmentalization, parallel medicine, magic, and esoteric attitudes are only some

examples that throw light on this phenomenon. The analysis of the contradictions and tensions of the Buddhist discourse reveals how the Buddhists follow different truths in different discursive circumstances. Worshipping gods at home is not on the same level as the celebration of Ambedkar's anniversary or participating in the festival of Holi. Buddhism and traditional customs are not mutually exclusive but coexistent. Why not perform a *puja* in honour of the goddess in order to cure a disease? Why shouldn't one make a wish for a baby? Without taking into consideration the functional interpretation of a ritual, some practices are definitely performed for a therapeutic effect. Despite these practices, it would not be right to conclude that such people do not consider themselves Buddhists or that they do not respect Ambedkar.

The study of the Buddhist discourse necessitates an analysis of the rituals along with the interpretations attributed to them. In my opinion, there exists a dialectical relation between notions and practices, doctrines and rituals. Instead of emphasizing on which one plays the more fundamental role, I have tried to explain how they are related. Henceforth, I take an approach that correlates various spheres of life, the private, family, professional, public, and political spheres. Without separating them completely from one another, these spheres are all characterized by specific rituals that refer to different logics. This means that all Buddhists do not practise the same rituals. Neither do they perform these rituals in an identical manner. There is no standardized Buddhist ritual life but there exist ritual practices that belong to various individuals or groups. Nevertheless, this diversity of situations and practices does not lead to any confusion. On the contrary, it is the idea of the radical activists to impose a universally applicable and exclusive Buddhist ritual norm that has given rise to the controversies described in this chapter.

NOTES

1. There are too many scientific analyses to mention here. I find the work of Bruce Kapferer (1991) and Frits Staal (1985 and 1989) on this topic particularly interesting.
2. The Sanskrit term of *caitya* probably designates a sacred place, a place for cremation, a tomb, or a grave. Schopen (1997: 90-1) thinks that the corresponding Pali word *cetiya* is simply another word that designates a stupa. In general, in archeological works and the history of art, the word *caitya* designates the reunion hall for the Buddhist monks (Plaeschke 1972: 35-8).

3. Cf. www.bodhgayanews.net
4. To be taken into account: 'Bihar Govt. Suitably Cites Holy Texts', *ToI*, 9 December 1994; 'Buddhist Panel not to Boycott Polls', *ToI*, 17 December 1994; K. Bhelari, 'A Movement Flounders: Neo-Buddhists Still Struggling to Liberate Bodhgaya', *The Week*, 4 June 1995: 19-20; 'Monks on Fast over Mahabodhi Shrine', *ToI*, 14 July 1995.
5. The Pali text goes: *Namo tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa, namo tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa, hamo tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa*.
6. As an expression of their respect and affection, some Buddhists have added a fourth refuge to the classic Three Refuges: that of Bhima (Zelliot 1992a: 224; Teltumbde 1997b: 14; Harvey 1990: 299). Thus *bhimam saranam gacchami* (I seek refuge in Bhima) is recited in Pali.
7. In Pali, the term *paritta* means 'protection'. Today in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists recite the *parittas* to protect themselves from eventualities, to cure diseases, to liberate themselves from possesion by evil spirits (Kalupahana 1994: 226-7; de Silva 2001).
8. Cf. *Khp*, 8-9; *Snip*, 25-6; *Loving Kindness* (Norman 1984: 24-5).
9. Cf. *Khp*, 3-6; *The Jewel Discourse* (Nanamoli 1960: 4-6).
10. Cf. *Snip*, 46-47; *Great Good-fortune* (Norman 1984: 44-5).
11. Originally, the term *vihara* (abode) exclusively designated the house of the monks. In Sri Lanka or Thailand, it is used to designate a monastery and a hall where an image of the Buddha is installed, i.e. a 'temple' (Gombrich 1991b: 146; Plaeschke 1972: 29-31).
12. The Ghatkopar incident in 1997 shows how profanity towards a statue links religion with politics. This is equally proved by the controversy surrounding the statues of Ambedkar erected by Mayawati in Lucknow in 1997. By constructing the Ambedkar Udyana and the Parivartan Chowk, Mayawati strengthened Ambedkar's position in a public place and thus asserted her power (cf. Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 230; S.P. Singh, 'Row over Tower: the UP Government and the ASI Entangled in a Tussle over the Parivartan Chowk', *Rashtriya Sahara*, September 1997: 57).
13. Gandhi wore sandals and a *dhoti*, the costume of a traditional Indian man. In fact, Ambedkar (1979c: 352) criticized Gandhi not only for his political stand but also for the way he appeared in public: a political leader who was proud of being almost naked.
14. I was informed about this by the respected Sangharakshita.
15. The terms *stuti* and *stotra* come from the Sanskrit root *stu*, *stavati* ('praise', 'sing', 'glorify') and can be translated as 'hymn' or 'eulogy'.
16. According to another version, published by the Buddhist Society of India (1993: 44), Rahul Bodhi (1990: 186) and the Buddha Dhamma Education Society (1992), Ambedkar governs through laws and science.
17. In the Buddhist terminology, the term *bhagavan* (or *bhagavant*) designates

above all a title dedicated to the Buddha. In the Hindu context, it designates a supreme being, a god as well as a saint.

18. Dinabandhu uses Marathi terms like *dalita* and *dina*. The Buddhist Society of India (1993: 44) and Rahul Bodhi (1990:86) present a slightly different version: Ambedkar is described as the jewel (*ratna*) who elevates his people (*svajana uddhara*).
19. The Buddhist Society of India (1993: 44) and Rahul Bodhi (1990:186) name Ambedkar as the 'king of the devotees' (*bhaktaraja*).
20. According to the Buddhist Society of India (1993: 44) and Rahul Bodhi (1990: 186), anger (*raudra*) was a characteristic trait of Ambedkar's personality.
21. The term *muktapatha* could designate the path that leads towards social emancipation or spiritual liberation or 'salvation', as the concept of *mukti* involves an important redemptive aspect.
22. The Marathi term *marga saja* designates 'the one who shows the path'. It should be noted that *marga* (way) possesses an immediate redemptive connotation in the Buddhist context as well as the Hindu one.
23. The version presented by the Buddhist Society of India (1993: 44) and Rahul Bodhi (1990: 186) puts it in simple words: 'You are called great man (*mahamanava*)'.
24. On 12 February and 27 May respectively.
25. In 1978 riots took place in Agra: On 14 April the Jatav Buddhists had organized a huge procession that was attacked by the Hindus. Consequently, demonstrations that later turned into violent confrontations between the Jatavs and the police, were carried out to protest against this incident. On 24 April, about ten persons were killed; hundreds were wounded and arrested (N. Ram 1995: 251-5).
26. *Pune Newsline*, 15 April 1997; *Pune Plus*, 15 April 1997.
27. It must be mentioned here that this term has another meaning according to other Buddhist traditions. It is on this day that the Buddha set the *dhamma* to role by delivering his first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattanasuttam* (*Samy.-Nik*. V, 360-3; *JMBSI*, 104, 3-4, July-December 1996: 79).
28. Among the 49 names of soldiers that are inscribed on the commemorative stone, 22 seem to be of Mahar origin. They can be identified due to the endings in *naka*, which was a designation used by the Mahars in the nineteenth century (Ramteke 1983: 81; Zelliot 1992a: 89).
29. From the beginning, the Mahars were military allies of the British. However, their recruitment was always a controversial issue. The British preferred soldiers from the 'races of warriors'. In Maharashtra the Marathas claimed this status, which is why the British recruited the Mahars only during wars (Cohen 1969: 456; Zelliot 1992a: 58).
30. In the ritual manuals, different versions of the same text are found (Buddhist Society of India 1993: 65; Patil 1991: 48-9; Pagare 1983: 43-5).

The versions differ only in nuances of style. A summary is given here.

31. From a comparative perspective this point seems particularly interesting. Even though the presence of a *bhikkhu*, who carries out the rites, gives this ceremony a religious touch, this ritual differs to a great extent from the death rites performed in other Asian countries like Sri Lanka where the presence of a monk is indispensable.
32. Trinh Xuan Thuan, a Buddhist astrophysicist of Vietnamese origin, opines, 'the religious and ritual aspects of Buddhism are an adaptation of the Buddha's original thoughts' (*Trinh Xuan Thuan: un astrophysicien*, interview with Jacques Vauthier, Beauchesne-Fayard, Paris, 1992, p. 6).
33. Cf. for example, Narada Maha Thera and Bhikku Sanghasena, *Buddha, My Refuge: Buddhism for Students of Primary School*, Maha Bodhi Society, Bangalore (n.d.). In the chapter 'Homage to the Buddha', the students learn that a Buddhist does not offer prayers but commemorates the Buddha by reciting the *suttas*. Another example is that of Acharya Buddharakkhita, *Devotion in Buddhism*, Buddha Vachana Trust, Bangalore (n.d.).
34. Surprisingly, the notion of *shraddha* (Pali *saddha*), an ancient Buddhist concept, is rejected (Gokhale 1994: 73; Harvey 1990: 170; *PED*: 675).
35. Refer to Rahul Bodhi (1990: 13), Patil (1991: 40), Buddha Dhamma Education Society of India (1992), Sadananda (1979), Pagare (1983), Dinabandhu (1993). Cf. the cassette *Puja*, *Buddha Prarthana ani Sutrapathana*, recorded by Shobha Mohod in Thane.

6. Institutionalizing Buddhism: Associations and Organizations

In the previous chapters I analysed various aspects of the Buddhist discourse. Now we will study its institutionalization in detail. In the following paragraphs, I will present several Buddhist institutions with their distinct objectives, and organizational structures. They differ from one another on the basis of ritual practice, manifestations and publications. This chapter will deal with determining whether typical discourses can be extrapolated from a certain organization and how these could be differentiated from one another. However, there is the problem of categorization. Do we restrict ourselves to the organizations with Buddhist names like the All India Bhikkhu Sangha, the Buddhist Society of India (BSI) or the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha (TBM), or do we include the various Dalit and Ambedkarite associations like the RPI and the People's Education Society? In order to conduct this study I have selected varied institutions that are representative and founded and administered by Buddhists. A systematic distinction between the political and the cultural or Buddhist and non-Buddhist is not possible.

THE *BHIKKHUSANGHA*

Well known for its pre-eminent role in selecting, transmitting and interpreting the Buddha's words, the *bhikkhusangha* is the Buddhist institution par excellence. It trains Buddhist religious experts and not only transmits the Buddha's *sasana*[1] but also administers the rituals. Besides this, it recruits and educates novices. In ancient times Buddhism is often defined on the basis of the operations of the *bhikkhusangha*, since very little is known about the relations between the laymen and the Buddhist monks. Lingat (1989: 21) states

that 'followers remaining in the world (*upasaka*)[2] did not form a distinct group. . . . In fact their ties with the *sangha* were very lopsided.' Similarly, Gombrich (1991b: 75) does not know whether the laymen followed only the Buddhist *dharma* because there is a strong possibility that they supported other religious orders as well? In Sri Lanka, there are still today monasteries situated near villages where the monks need the laymen and thus they establish strong ties with them (Obeyesekere 1984: 267). Let us not forget that monastic community needs a stable financial support to survive in this world. Consequently, Tambiah (1984a: 208) has inferred that the laity has always been an integral and important part of the Buddhist community. Dharmapala, the great modern Buddhist reformer who has been quoted in this study, has finally reinforced the place of the laymen within the Buddhist community.

When one enters on Ambedkar's movement, the situation is seen from a different angle. The converts were Mahars and Jatavs, untouchables, ignorant of canonic Buddhism and essentially constituted a lay community. In other words, there was no *bhikkhu-sangha* already existing, they had to create it. Today, there are a sizeable number of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* of Mahar origin. The Maharashtrian *bhikkhusangha* seems to have a considerable influence on the entire monastic community in India. Kantowsky (1999: 139) reports that among the 1,250 monks living presently in India, approximately a thousand are Ambedkarite Buddhists. Similarly, the Akhil Bharatiya Bauddha Bhikkhu Sangha (AIBS, All India Bhikkhu Sangha), the association that brings together monks from all over India, has a majority of Maharashtrian Buddhists (Kantowsky 1999: 139-43). In fact, the recent national assemblies organized by this association have taken place in Maharashtra, Nagpur in 1997 and in Dhule in 1998.

In his autobiography the *bhikkhu* Sumedh (1926-97) writes that he was the first Mahar to have joined the *bhikkhusangha*. In an interview with me in Mumbai in 1995, he explained how it happened. In his youth, Sumedh dreamt of becoming an actor, a film star. When the need to earn his bread arose, he tried out various professions but was satisfied with none. Then the young man decided to lead the life of a Hindu 'ascetic'. He left for the north of India, for Kalimpong, where he met the *bhikkhu* Ananda Kausalyayan. Impressed by him he decided to become a Buddhist novice. In 1955 he obtained his ordination as a *bhikkhu*. The same

year, he met Ambedkar in Aurangabad. Having learnt from the newspapers that Ambedkar wanted to convert to Buddhism, Sumedh went to pay him a visit. Ambedkar must have been very happy to meet the first *bhikkhu* of Mahar origin (Sumedh 1994: 61). Sumedh associated himself with the Buddhist Society of India after his conversion. Here, it should be mentioned that he became the most severe critic of the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha. Till the very end of his life, he bluntly attacked this association, accusing it of having appropriated Ambedkar. I will deal with this topic in detail a little later. Sumedh was the 'social worker' kind of a *bhikkhu* who never confined himself to a monastery but travelled from place to place propagating Buddhism among the masses.

Sumedh remains a peculiar example since while he travelled in north India he maintained contact with famous Buddhists authorities. However, the general situation regarding the recruitment of the monks is much different. Most of these monks are Mahars. Some of them are educated and initiated into the *sangha* by *bhikkhus*. Others convert of their own accord and hence do not receive the ordination by law. According to the rigid Theravada rule, they are not 'true' monks because all novices must obtain their ordination from monks who in turn possess a legal ordination. While Maharashtrian Buddhists identify with the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the ancient monastic rules (*vinaya*) do not have a decisive hold on them. Some *bhikkhus* live in groups in temples, others all alone. Some live exclusively on alms (*bhiksha*), others pursue professions in colleges. I have met monks who have obtained degrees at universities as well as some illiterate monks. Some of them were political activists and ardent followers of the Dalit movement and there were others who were essentially priests responsible for the administration of rituals, like marriage ceremonies or cremations.

The bhikkhunis

Let us now enter into the topic of the Buddhist *bhikkhunis* of Mahar origin, not studied in detail until now. Their existence is as important as the fact that female ordination had almost died out in Asia during the last few centuries. The recrudescence has manifested itself only in this century. Today, a large community of religious female Buddhists lives in Korea, Japan, Sri Lanka and Thailand (Harvey 1990: 222-3).

There is the example of Devakabai Chandrabhau Khandare, born in 1924 in a Mahar family in the district of Akola. She grew up in extreme poverty. After losing her husband and son, this illiterate woman renounced the world and became a *bhikkhuni*. Driven by the wish to sacrifice her life for her community, she shaved her head and donned a yellow robe. Since then she has lived in the temple of Vaishakha, in the Bhimnagar locality in Akola, preaches Buddhism, and meditates. The Buddhist laymen of the locality give her alms. Once, when some *bhikkhus* had come from Sri Lanka, they gave her the name of Nandasheela as a token of appreciation for her devotion (Moon and Pavar 1989: 228-9). Nandasheela's example indicates that most of the contemporary religious female Buddhists do not follow the orthodox rules according to which the presence of a group of *bhikkhunis* is obligatory when a *bhikkhuni* receives her ordination (Harvey 1990: 223).

Another important example is that of Chandrabhaga Chothamala. Born in 1920 in a Mahar family, she was married at the age of ten. After she reached puberty, she started living with her husband who beat her regularly. Her terrible family life became unbearable. In 1973, she became an *anagarika*[3] and *shramaneri.* Two

Fig. 16: Initiation of Buddhist novices in Nashik (photograph by the author).

years later she became a *bhikkhuni*. Today, under the name of Chandrasheela she lives with Nandasheela in the same temple in Akola. She says:

> When I heard of Doctor Ambedkar, I decided to participate in his movement. At that time reunions were held in Akola. I started attending them. I was in school, but I had not graduated to secondary school. I started reading Baba's *Janata* and *Prabuddha*. I also started singing songs of Bhim. I even wrote some. My life was very miserable. But gradually I started doing some social work. . . . This work drowns my sorrow. . . . In 1956, I went to Nagpur. I got converted to Buddhism. I worked for the *Buddhist Society of India*. Later, I worked for the *Republican Party of India.* I wrote a play for children with the title *Bhagvan Gautam Buddha alias Siddhartha*. I also put it up with some children. In 1957 . . . I received a prize for this play. With a lot of courage I started a propaganda campaign for the Buddhist *dhamma*. . . . I had my head shaved and donned a yellow robe. On the 23rd of March 1973, I received the status of *anagarika* and then I became *shramaneri.* Because the *bhikkhus* refused to allow me the initiation into the *sangha*, I went to Bodh Gaya in 1975. In the Chinese temple a *bhikkhuni* initiated me into the *sangha* under the name of Chandrasheela. Then, I had an occasion to meet the venerable Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan. He informed me that the *bhikkhunis* do not wear yellow robes but pink ones. This is why I changed my robe. When I went to Kathmandu to attend a lecture, I wore a pink robe. . . . Today, my mind is calm. I do some social work. I am proud of completing the work that Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar had started. Ever since I have become a *bhikkhuni* I live with Nandasheela in the temple of Vaishakha in the Bhimnagar locality in Akola. . . . We eat only once a day. We explain the principles of Buddhism to the people in very simple words. We make them understand the Five Precepts, the Ten Virtues and how to celebrate Buddhist festivals. We provide them with rational explanations for everything. I have led a very painful life, but now I feel satisfied. (Moon and Pavar 1989: 229-30)

This narrative is very interesting, more so because these women come from a poor and marginalized social background. One of them is even illiterate. After having led a life of sorrow, they chose renunciation. They participated in the Ambedkarite move-ment and became nuns by sacrificing their lives for the community. All the same, this has been rare. The percentage of nuns in the entire monastic community is minimal. But their importance should not be underestimated. On 15 February 1998, in Bodh Gaya, approximately a hundred women, among whom one third were Maharashtrian, received the ordination of *bhikkhuni.*[4]

Laymen and monks: resentments and criticism

The Ambedkarite Buddhist movement is essentially a movement of lay people. The numerous temples all over Maharashtra are directed and maintained by the local Buddhist community. A monk rarely resides in the temples. Many of the Buddhists have never met a *bhikkhu*. Their small number and rare public appearances obviously reduces their popularity. On asking the Buddhist lay activists their opinion of the *bhikkhusangha*, I realized that it is rather negative and they showed strong resentment towards this institution. In fact, Ambedkar himself had described the *bhikkhus* in the Asian Buddhist countries as useless and parasitical. The feeling that it is the perversion of the *sangha* that has ruined Buddhism, is widespread among all the Buddhist reformers. D.R. Waghmare (1995: 215-16) declares, for example, that it is not enough to shave one's head, don an ochre robe, and recite some *mantras* to become a *bhikkhu*. He regrets the fact that the *sangha* is not strong, well organized or educated in India. Similarly, some Dalit activists criticise the *sangha* for its autocratic character and because it does not help the poor. In an interview, Daya Pawar explains: 'The monks work to fill their own pockets. . . . We do not like the traditional Buddhism with monks. Look at the monks from Sri Lanka! They own luxury cars. We don't like such type of monks. We need missionaries and not Hindu *sadhus*. These monks are completely ignorant of Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar.' Similarly, Raja Dhale says:

> The *bhikkhus* are useless in all senses of the term. Why do they teach in Pali, a language that no one understands? Why not in Marathi? We need social *bhikkhus*. Certainly, it is said that the *sangha* was founded by the Buddha. However, it is not proven. Probably the Buddha did found it. A monastic institution was in fashion at that time. Under his guidance . . . why not. But after his death, the perversion and decadence of the *sangha* started. Some bad elements were introduced. The *bhikkhus* know nothing about Buddhism. Ambedkar had envisioned a different kind of monk. The *bhikkhus* need to understand that Buddhism is not a spiritual movement with *vipassana*,[5] peace of mind, rituals etc. We are not this kind of Buddhists. . . . We aim for *social upliftment*. The traditional *bhikkhus* are spiritual. We need to create a new *bhikkhusangha*. The *bhikkhu* should be a social worker.

Another Buddhist, of Mahar origin, 52 years of age, professor at the University of Mumbai, says: 'The *bhikkhusangha* should stop praying. *Bhikkhus* should come out of the temples. The *bhikkhus*

should educate themselves and then teach economics, politics and literature. The *bhikkhus* should educate activists and prepare them for revolution. With some rare exceptions, the *bhikkhus* do not carry out the necessary work.' These words of criticism are all very much alike. They question the traditional concept of the *sangha* as a monastic and spiritual community and they recognize the need to form a special Buddhist organization that would not just deal with the propagation of the *dhamma* but also with real economic and social problems. According to D.R. Waghmare (1995: 215 and 219), the *bhikkhusangha* should follow the Jesuit model of the Christian missionary and do some social work. Sheshrao Meshram (1990: 70) claims the universal dimension of Buddhism and demands that the *sangha* should operate on an international level. Finally, many Buddhists consider the *bhikkhusangha* a religious authority without a decisive place within the community.

Orthodoxy and new Buddhism: Irritation and Solidarity

The converted Ambedkarites had to fight for a rightful place as Buddhists among the 'traditional' Buddhists. The elite from these communities looked upon those waves of mass conversion with a certain hesitation since they were a result of a movement that was 'too political'. As a matter of fact, Ambedkar had himself severely criticised the traditional *bhikkhusangha*. The rise of conflict was thus inevitable. In fact, the international Buddhist community welcomed very distrustfully Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.[6] A considerable number of Buddhists denounced Ambedkar because he was a 'heretic'. Lobsang Jivaka (1959b), a *shramanera* of British nationality at that time residing in India, accuses Ambedkar of not preaching the true Buddhist *dharma*. Ambedkar's Buddhism is based on hatred, whereas the Buddha's Buddhism is based on compassion. Jivaka also criticizes the Ambedkarites for prescribing what the *bhikkhus* should do and should not do.[7]

Such instances of anger and misunderstanding have always characterized the relations between the Buddhists called 'traditional' on the one hand and the Ambedkarite Buddhists on the other. The Dalai Lama is a good example. He has visited several Ambedkarite places in Maharashtra like the Caitanya Stupa in Nashik. He had even initiated more than a thousand Ambedkarites to Buddhism in

Delhi on 11 March 1973; an event that made L. Kenadi (1995: 66-7) believe that the Dalai Lama would be Ambedkar's successor. In reality the Dalai Lama has his reservations. In an interview, he says:

> The late Dr Ambedkar was a scholar, lawyer and a freedom-fighter. This shows that he was a serious person who was really committed and determined. So, I feel that there were some valid reasons behind his conversion. He saw the benefit of taking on Buddhism at the individual level and at the community level. . . . But he did not convert necessarily against another (religion) but rather in order to gain full rights for the individual or community. . . . Today, among the followers, there are people who do not seem to have the same proper foundation for converting. They do not see the positive side of Buddhism, but rather only their dissatisfaction with caste. These people are motivated by their feelings against the other religion (Hinduism). That is a little bit unhealthy. . . . They forget about the value of Buddhism and simply criticise the Hindus and the traditional religious Brahmin priests. That is not good. . . . I remember going to a small function in UP, about one hour's drive from Delhi. At the meeting, some neo-Buddhists started some very serious criticism against brahmans. The audience resented and a very tense atmosphere was created. After that I decided that I would not go to that kind of a meeting again.[8]

What is most striking is the view that Ambedkar did not convert to Buddhism in order to protest against Hinduism, a hypothesis that is contradicted by every speech of Ambedkar. How can the Dalai Lama not know this? According to him every militant action and every protest contradicts the pacifist message of Buddhism. True, the Dalai Lama cannot openly criticise 'domestic' problems in India since, after all, he is a political refugee. But his view is reflective of widespread opinions of monks.

Similarly Kondinga, a *bhikkhu* of Sinhalese origin currently residing in India, explains in a personal interview in Agra: 'The neo-Buddhists are too militant, too violent. They are neither Hindus nor Buddhists. They are not educated well and know almost nothing about Buddhism.'

In fact, a considerably large section of the *bhikkhus* in India and other countries find the followers of Ambedkar aggressive, and their movement too political. They maintain a certain distance and denounce the neo-Buddhists as those who worship a man's statue and know nothing about Buddhism.

Maintaining a distance from the Ambedkarite Buddhists is only one trend, there are some other trends as well. *Bhikkhus* like Rahula

Sankrityayan, Jagdish Kashyapa, and Dharmananda Kosambi supported Ambedkar. There are some others too. Ananda Kausalyayan (1905-88), originally from Punjab, is the best example. An old member of the Arya Samaj, he first worked for the Maha Bodhi Society. He knew Ambedkar and advised him on the procedures to follow during the conversion ceremony in Nagpur. He was in Delhi when Ambedkar died and escorted his body to Bombay where he performed his last rites. On 7 December 1956, he initiated into Buddhism thousands of people who had come to the cremation grounds. Later, he wrote books on various philosophical and practical aspects of Buddhism and translated Ambedkar's works into Hindi.[9] He lived his last years in Nagpur and taught Buddhism to new converts.

What is the specific characteristic of the *bhikkhusangha* at the heart of the Ambedkar movement? First we can conclude that the monks are not the key players when it comes to the creation of a new tradition. The monks have only a marginal role to play in Dalit literature, theatre, popular poetry, and discourse. A *bhikkhusangha* has certainly been established, but it is just one organization among others. Its marginalization can be explained in many ways, but the one that contributes the most is Ambedkar's criticism of the traditional *bhikkhusangha*. Thus, right from the start, laicism has been favoured in spite of the monks from the outside who committed themselves to the movement. It is evident that the Maharashtrian *bhikkhusangha* has only meagre resources at its disposal. This explains why the monks and the nuns have not been ordained and have not been subjected to any strict monastic discipline. Nevertheless it is too early to pass a judgement. The Buddhist movement is a plan in progress that has not yet succeeded. The question has to remain open in order to know how the *bhikkhusangha* will determine the Ambedkarite movement in the future. It is possible that the Dalit activists will no longer resent the *bhikkhusangha* and the *bhikkhu* will be more influential. At the national level, the increasing number of monks of Mahar origin is already significant and has helped them to emerge from isolation.

THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY OF INDIA

Ambedkar founded the Buddhist Society of India (BSI) in 1955. After his death, his son, Yeshwant Ambedkar, became its President. In

1977, the latter's wife Miratai Ambedkar took over as president of the association.

The BSI has its headquarters in Maharashtra. It also has branches in Agra and Delhi, and also in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Bengal, and Punjab. It is extremely difficult to ascertain the number of members, as verification is practically impossible. In Maharashtra, the BSI has branches everywhere; there are more than 244 branches in Mumbai alone (Fiske 1972: 119; Zelliot 1992a: 242). Thus the BSI is not a centrally administered organization but a collection of small groups restricted to particular places. Innumerable sectarian and autonomous branches and sub-branches appear, like the Bharat Bauddha Sangh, the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha or the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasangha.

According to its agenda, the BSI's objective is to make India a Buddhist country, as Ambedkar had said. It attempts to promote Buddhism in India and to build temples. It is committed to setting up schools and colleges, orphanages and seminaries. It trains *bauddhacaryas*, that are experts on Buddhism. After a three-month training period and an examination, these experts can conduct various rituals like marriage. They function as priests. The BSI publishes tracts and small brochures as well as guides to Buddhist rituals.

The meetings are often just an opportunity to discuss existing problems of all sorts. Certain members seem more involved than others and have political objectives that are a lot more ambitious. According to a strongly ideological discourse, the association's objective is social progress and the eradiction of discrimination among castes, the fight against injustice (*anyay*) and the claim of equal rights for Dalits. Still others come across as missionaries when they declare that they would like to spread Buddhism and peace all over the world. No distinction between the association's religious and political activities has been established. A Buddhist, 38 years old and a professor at the University of Pune says: 'I became a member of the BSI by following in the footsteps of my parents. I joined this association in order to understand Buddhism better and to make the masses more aware. It is essential to reunite and unify our people under the Buddhist flag.' A young Buddhist, who works in Mumbai, briefly explains the association's main activities: 'The BSI does religious work. It brings the *dhamma* to the people through lectures. It also organizes seminars for women and children. We are

trying to convert all of India to Buddhism. I attend the association's meetings four to five times a month.' In different parts of Pune, in temples, the BSI organizes meetings on a regular basis. It runs kindergartens and matrimonial activities. Marriage cere-monies are conducted under the auspices of the association. The administration of Buddhist rites is in fact a key activity of the BSI. A Buddhist, 47-year-old, a lawyer and among other things, an active member of the BSI, says: 'I am a member of the BSI. This association was founded by Babasaheb Ambedkar. It conducts all the rites that accompany birth, name giving, marriage, the inauguration of a new house, funeral rites, and purification rites.'

The BSI suggests how to decorate the altar and the essential tools required to perform the rites. Miratai Ambedkar demands that 'no Buddhist should practise a *samskara* that hasn't been approved by the BSI' (The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 9). According to the General-Secretary of the association, V.J. Gayakwad, 'only the BSI is authorized to perform the Buddhist *samskaras*' (The Buddhist Society of India 1993: 13). In fact, the BSI considers itself to be the 'mother' of the various Buddhist associations in India, in other words, the only legitimate authority.

Recruitement

The members of the BSI become members in an 'automatic' manner. Being a member of the BSI is a sort of inheritance. If the father was a member of the BSI, the son will be too. The head positions of the organization have this system of affiliation. The role of the local president often goes from father to son. A Buddhist of Mahar origin, 35 years old, married, father of two and working narrates: 'I am a member of the BSI in Pune. My father was one of the founders of this association. He died in 1973. I rejoined the association because I am aware of my father's ambitions and his devotion to Buddhism. I would like to realise his dreams.' In my survey I realized that the members took their affiliation to the association for granted. The fact that Ambedkar founded it is the main reason. As a mark of respect to him each Buddhist feels 'obliged' to become a member of this organization. A Buddhist from the district of Pune, 50 years of age and a social activist tells me, 'I became a member because Babasaheb Ambedkar founded the BSI and also because it is the first association of the Buddhist religion.' A Buddhist from the city of

Pune who is 75 years old and retired recalls, 'I became a member of the BSI so that I could realize Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar's dream. He asked us to become members. He said that if we wished to attain our goal, it was essential to join.'

People say that the BSI lost its dynamism after Ambedkar's death. The movement was orphaned and left without guidance. Thus, the only answer to the existing problems would be a powerful and strong new leader. People used to say that a new Babasaheb would help the movement gain momentum. The existing situation is not quite reassuring. The association's office in Dadar reveals the disastrous state in which the association finds itself. The BSI is blaimed for its passive, corrupt, defeatist, and autocratic state. The leaders have to constantly defend themselves against criticism. The people look upon their leadership as elitist and corporate in nature. The controversy that surrounds the association's administration is very important. Another point is its lack of funds. The BSI does not own anything. This is because most of the members do not pay their fees regularly. Apart from these problems, there is another that is more serious. The BSI comprises mainly Mahars and does not maintain ties with other Buddhist organizations in India or abroad.

The BSI has the same characteristics as those of a caste association. It is an association that recruits its members from the same caste, organizing itself in such a fashion as to gain social mobility, and to form a political pressure group. The creation of scholarship funds, student support, and the publication of religious tracts and writings are a few examples of such an association's field of activity (Assayag 1996; Deliège 1993: 105-10; Srinivas 1995a). Of course, the BSI was founded with an open policy in mind, since Ambedkar wanted to establish an association at a national level. But it followed the social dynamics of caste and thus became one of many Mahar associations.

THE TRAILOKYA BAUDDHA MAHASANGHA

The Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha (TBM, The Buddhist Order of the Three Worlds)[10] is an institution managed by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) with branches in different parts of India, since 1979. Maharashtra is the centre of its activities. A meaningful dynamism, which is symbiotic as well as conflicting,

unifies and opposes British Buddhists and 'former untouchables'.

Sangharakshita and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

At the age of sixteen, the young Dennis Lingwood (born in 1926) discovered that he has always been a Buddhist deep down (Sangharakshita 1988: 19-22). In 1949, at Kushinagara, he was initiated into the sangha and renamed Sangharakshita by the revered Bhikkhu Chandramani, who, seven years later, converted Ambedkar. In November 1950, Sangharakshita rejoined the *bhikkhusangha* at Sarnath and was ordained by a well-known religious authority from Rangoon (Sangharakshita 1988: 31-4). The ordination ceremony was conducted under the auspices of the Theravada order of Burma. This is an important detail since the Burmese monastic tradition dates probably back to the Buddha. Refusing all sectarian leanings, Sangharakshita also embraced the Vajrayana type of Buddhism a few years later (Sangharakshita 1988: 70-3). From 1952 onwards, Sangharakshita met Ambedkar a few times, and the latter considered him a friend and advisor (Sangharakshita 1986a: 15-27). Ambedkar had even asked him to preside over his conversion ceremony. But Sangharakshita modestly advised him to approach the revered Chandramani (Lokamitra 1998: 13). After Ambedkar's death, he committed himself to the progress of the movement. After 1959, he spent each winter in Maharashtra and taught Buddhism to the new converts. In 1967, he founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in London, an organization that was lay and spiritual in nature. Buddhism is not an intellectual game that is reserved for the academicians. It is a belief true to life, and a powerful practice. It shows the way leading to an interior life and an esoteric and transcendental awareness. Sangharakshita writes:

> The FWBO is definitely a Buddhist spiritual movement. But it does not confuse Buddhism with any of its Eastern cultural forms. In the same way, the FWBO does not identify itself with any particular sect or school of Buddhism. . . . It is just Buddhist. . . . The FWBO, I hope . . . tries to see Buddhism from the Buddhist point of view. And it seaks to create a new Western civilization and culture: one which will express Buddhist spiritual values, one which will help the individual to develop instead of hindering him or her, and one which will provide the basis for a spiritual community and new society. (Sangharakshita 1991a: 16-19)

The FWBO's objective is the creation of a society where the spiritual development of each individual would underlie all activities. This idea is linked to a critique of the 'old' Western society. Family bounds, Christianity, and the pseudo-liberalism are the major obstacles that oppose the formation of 'real' individuals (Subhuti 1988: 174-82). An important element of the FWBO's institutionalized doctrine is a certain naïve anti-intellectualism.The *dhamma* transcends common sense. The Buddha's teaching shows in an implicit manner the limitations of a rational mind and opens up new facets of the conscience (Subhuti 1988: 103). This stand presents a contrast to Ambedkar's rationalist reasoning.

The FWBO is essentially a lay movement. The notion of *sangha* covers the entire spiritual community. The *bhikkhusangha* is respected to a certain extent. But since the FWBO operates in the West, the monastic institution is not the only possible form of organization. The members and the activists of the FWBO can marry. Certain members do, others lead a life of celibacy and chastity. In the United Kingdom, they live in small communities, most of which are unisex.[11] Today, the order comprises 700 ordained members called Dharmacharis and thousands of Dhammamitras (friends of the *dhamma*). The publishing house Windhorse Publications is located in Glasgow. Windhorse Trading, the commercial branch, is located in Cambridge. Today, the FWBO has its centres in different countries, in the United States, Europe, Canada, Mexico, Australia and India where the spiritual revolution has its supporters who were formerly untouchables (Vessantara 1988; Pilchick 1988).

Coming to India

As mentioned earlier, the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha and the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana (TBMSG, Association of the Friends of the Buddhist Order of the Three Worlds) established itself in Maharashtra in 1979. At first, it was involved in recruiting followers of Mahar origin to form the organization. By 1983, there were 187 members (Subhuti 1988: 199-200). In 1987, the first two women of Mahar origin, Shobhana Labhane and Nirmala Karat joined the TBM as Dhammacharinis and received the names Jnanasuri and Vimalsuri (Padmasuri 1997: 180-5). Today the TBM and the TBMSG have centres in a number of cities in

Maharashtra, such as Aurangabad, Nagpur, Mumbai, Ulhasnagar, Nanded, and Kolhapur. Yet the heart of the institution is in Dapodi, a suburb of Pune. The Dhammacakra Pravartana Mahavihara has its headquarters on the banks of the river Pavana that flows through the Dapodi village, a place the Mahars consider their *vatana* (Fitzgerald 1993: 30). Inside the temple, there is the Buddha's statue, which is surrounded by the photographs of the revered Sangharakshita and Ambedkar. There are offices, a large library, and lecture and meditation halls as well. In 1998, a statue of Ambedkar was erected in the courtyard. It depicts Ambedkar at the time of his conversion to Buddhism, dressed in a *dhoti*.

The TBM employs its members on a full-time basis. The administrators receive a modest salary regularly. It has a very effective structure. It also has important logistical and financial support, a large portion of which comes from the West.[12] In the United Kingdom, the charity fund Aid for India has collected large sums of money. The Bahujan Hitay and the Karuna Trust finance and supervise the construction of students' hostels, the organisation of lectures, classes for needlework, and sport, crèches and kindergartens as well as medical assistance. In my opinion, it would be unfair to think that the TBM's charitable activities are driven only by a strategy of missionary adaptability and recognition. (In India, all the big Hindu temples are engaged in charity work and shelter orphans.) These social activities can only be appreciated. But questions about the TBM do arise. How does an organization from the West integrate into a Maharashtrian Buddhist community?

In western Maharashtra, not far from the Pune-Mumbai highway, facing the famous Buddhist Bhaja caves, is situated one of the centres run by the TBMSG for Buddhist meditation, the Saddhamma Pradeep Retreat Centre. On 16 March 1997 the temple was full of men, women and children. A crowd of around 500 people, of both Indian and Western people had gathered there and an important ceremony of ordination took place. Three young Dhammamitras became Dhammacharis. The atmosphere was cheerful. Everybody was happy to see each other and waited impatiently for the ceremony to start. A surprising thing was that those who presided over the ceremony were all Buddhists of British origin. Dhammachari I., one of the first Indian members of the TBM, translated the words of the heads into Hindi so that the crowd could follow the ceremony. Dhammachari A., of British origin, started with an introduction in

English. He said that it was the first initiation ceremony in two years and that he understood the frustration that some of the others felt. He confessed that the association was facing some grave problems. There were too many requests, too many candidates, and at the same time too many bad experiences. Some people only wanted the title Dhammachari, but lacked serenity. These people would stop practising the *dhamma* as soon as they were admitted into the TBMSG. He assured the people that the movement was growing and that the spiritual work was making progress. The doors would be open to new followers. Then he introduced three young boys who had been ordained privately in the Buddhist Bhaja caves.[13] During a public initiation ceremony, they should show that the *dhamma* is at the centre of all their activities and thoughts. The crowd then welcomed them to the spiritual community by clapping the young boys who entered the hall, wearing long blue shirts, the TBM/TBMSG's 'uniform'. They then offered a candle, flowers, and incense, symbols of the Buddha, the *dhamma,* and the sangha. According to the authorized doctrine, the offerings make them more attentive and receptive. They then recited texts in Pali, like the Three Refuges and the Ten Precepts. A purification rite was also per-

Fig. 17: Initiation ceremony organized by the TBM in 1997 (photograph by the author).

formed.[14] Once the head presiding over the ceremony had poured a little water over the disciple's forehead, everybody received a small scarf decorated with the Refuges. Then the initiates received their religious names. Other Dhammacharis blessed them by reciting a few lines in Pali. The three boys left the hall; everybody sang verses in Pali, threw coloured rice, and shouted '*sadhu*'[15] three times. Once the ceremony was finally over, a *puja* and a collective meal followed.

Rituals, meditation and spirituality

Like all Buddhist associations, the TBM/TBMSG regulates the cultural life of its members. From a formal point of view the same Pali canon is recited and the same *samskaras* are practised as by the BSI. However, one does not find hymns dedicated to Ambedkar in the ritual manuals, and the festive calendar includes the celebrations of the birth anniversaries of Dharmapala and Sangharakshita. The Dhamacharis Bodhisagar and Vimalkirti (1994) give a detailed explanation of how Buddhist rites are different from the traditional religions as there is no almighty god and they also explain the importance of the practice of *puja*. Similarly, Sangharakshita (1987b: 445) considers *puja* an essential aspect of Buddhism allowing for a better concentration of the five senses in order to attain enlightenment. *Puja* is thus interpreted in a purely symbolic manner. The flowers used are a symbol of the transient nature of this world, of its changing state and of transformation. The flame of the lamp symbolizes light that drives away darkness (Bodhisagar and Vimalkirti 1994: 23). Through this ritual the Buddhist devotee expresses his profound faith. He also expresses his gratitude for the higher ideals of Buddhism and for the *sangha*, in other words, the entire Buddhist community including the monks, the commoners and the Buddha himself. In prostrating in front of the statue of the Buddha the devotee is thus in no way following the religion blindly (Bodhisagar and Vimalkirti 1994: 24).

The most important feature that distinguishes the TBM from the BSI or the other Buddhist organizations is regular meditation. Each individual must develop his own spirituality. Arun, a 24-year-old 'ex-Mahar' who sells books at the entrance of the temple at Dapodi says:

Conversion to Buddhism is advantageous to us in many ways. We are no

longer forced to practise religion blindly and no longer do we suffer from an inferiority complex. Today we believe in ourselves (*atmavishvasa*). We have achieved happiness (*sukhi*). We know the truth (*satya*) and thanks to our faith (*shraddha*) we have a clear and objective perception of things around us. We have learnt the true sense of life (*jivanaca khara artha*). . . . As Buddhists have a superior moral code (*shilacarana*), I no longer commit sins (*vyasana*). I follow the Five Precepts. Thanks to Buddhism I enjoy a respectable position in society today.

Arun wants to become 'a good' Buddhist. And he has therefore learnt the correct way to practise Buddhism through meditation. Ever since he has become a member of the TBMSG, he has accepted the Five Precepts as an ethical rule and his life has changed. According to him, 'As I am a Buddhist I no longer sin. I follow the Five Precepts. I enjoy a respectable position in society today. . . . I practice meditation and thus control my mind and I gain mental satisfaction. Meditation has helped me discover my shortcomings and I have imbibed good qualities.' His life as a Buddhist is marked by study, meditation and rituals:

As a Buddhist I meditate at 6.30 every morning. Every Monday we study the *dhamma*. . . . I try to practice *dhamma*. I study *dhamma* in order to develop my personality, besides we also carry out regular self-evaluation in order to gauge how sincerely we practice the *dhamma*. . . . I try to meet as many people as possible in order to explain to them the qualities of Buddhism. In my area I also conduct a *vandana* session once a week. I am trying to lead the people towards Buddhism.

Buddhism does not come naturally to you. It is a conscious choice. Buddhism is not determined by birth. Similarly, one cannot argue that one has become a Buddhist 'because of Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar'. In fact, Ambedkar is not the central reference. Even as he continues to play a key role in the Buddhist philosophy, the Buddhist identity is defined as a unique ethical mindset and spiritual state. At the same time, there are many individualistic and separatist claims. According to Arun, 'true' Buddhism can be learned only at the TBMSG:

I became a member of the TBMSG because this institution helps one become a true Buddhist. The true knowledge and practice of Buddhism are characteristic of this institution. We don't only preach, we also try to practice the *dhamma*. . . . We organize meditation classes, we practice fraternity (*bandhutva*) between human beings and we propagate the ideal of a *bodhisattva*. We also have social concerns.

These words are typical of most members of the TBMSG. Prakash, a bachelor who works as a receptionist at the Dapodi temple says:

> I was born a Buddhist but really speaking nobody can be a Buddhist without practising *dhamma*. It is not possible to be a Buddhist merely by birth. . . . I sought refuge in the Buddha, in the *dhamma* and in the *sangha*. I think I am on Buddha's path. I want to become a Dhammamitra. A Buddhist is more than a mere 'physical' human being. He is a 'spiritual being'. . . . I want to become a true Buddhist.'

This is something new. The members of the BSI never mentioned anything similar. According to the followers of the TBMSG, one cannot be a Buddhist 'like that'. One becomes a Buddhist by personal and spiritual effort and by spiritualization at the time of socialization. The Dhammachari A., ex-Mahar, 63-year-old, married, father of two, and a TBM official says:

> On 21 May 1986, I converted to Buddhism. At that time, I came into contact with the TBMSG. Thanks to this association, I was able to learn more about Buddhism. Today, meditation (*dhyana*), good actions (*acara*) and practising *dhamma* are part of my daily life. I love meditation. On 4 September 1991, I became a Dhammachari. . . . Being a Buddhist implies practising Buddhism. Thus I follow the Five Precepts. I seek refuge in the Buddha, in the *dhamma* and in the *sangha.* I feel compassion for all living beings. I believe neither in god (*deva*) nor in divinities (*devata*). I do not have blind faith (*andhashraddha*). I do not believe in the soul. I practice meditation and read Buddhist literature. . . . My face radiates tranquillity, satisfaction and freshness. I am always happy. I help people in solving their problems. My thinking and behaviour is different from others. I am not envious, nor am I jealous. Personally I am an honest man. My daily life is based on truth.

The Dhammachari U., 'ex-Mahar', 54 year old and head of a family, former civil servant, presently working with the TBM, explains: 'I think of myself as a Buddhist because I do not believe in god but in humanity. I practice Buddhism. I would like to develop my personality and help others. . . . Meditation allows us to increase our levels of consciousness in order to become better human beings.' These statements resemble one another and represent a collective and homogeneous pattern of thought. The most important arguments are the emphasis on practising Buddhism, specific ethical behaviour, and meditation. There is a distinct Buddhist identity in

people's minds and their actions. Each Buddhist gains a new personality through enlightenment and spiritual awakening. Being a Buddhist is thus related to a conscious state and to a specific behaviour. One becomes a better person by practising *dhamma*.

According to the official doctrine of the TBM, spirituality is at the centre of all Buddhist existence. However, it also implies social and political consequences. Neither social work nor politics are objectives in themselves, as the TBM is essentially a spiritual movement. Thus it is not surprising to read TBM publications that state that the Buddhist temple should be purely a spiritual site and not a political hub (Bodhisagar and Vimalkirti 1994: 97). In fact, every conflict between the individual and society necessitates a spiritual solution (Sangharakshita 1991a: 12). The Dhammachari Lokamitra[16] has repeatedly explained how individual spiritual development will bring about a social transformation. According to him:

> There seems to be a great affinity between the approaches of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Venerable Sangharakshita to the *dhamma*. Both, in trying to take the Dhamma into new situations at the end of the 20th century, took a very radical approach to Buddhism. . . . This is not to deny the importance of other work such as politics and education. This too is the basis of our relationship with the wider dalit movement . . . but we believe that the best contribution we can make is to help them [dalits] understand Buddhism and how that can bring about deep changes in the individual and society.[17]

In fact, a majority of the members of TBM/TBMSG criticize the Dalit movement for its excessively aggressive militant and political attitudes. The Dhammachari U., 50-year-old, married, father of two children and a TBM employee explains why a true Buddhist cannot be a Dalit:

> The Dalit movement results from the poor social conditions of the untouchables. They have their own literature that is called Dalit literature. But this literature is too pessimistic. It deals with politics. The Dalit movement does not have a positive approach to Buddhism. . . . My personal experience is different. I have developed my personality. I no longer call myself Dalit. I consider myself a Buddhist.

This shows that the term Dalit is considered an insult. Similarly, Prakash, the young receptionist says: 'We are Buddhists. Dalit means a non-emancipated person. Thus we are trying to progress and to

abandon this name.' The same Dhammachari A., who has already been mentioned above, says:

> The word 'dalit' signifies poverty, slavery, lack of self-respect. This is not the case with Buddhism, Buddhism means *dhamma*, moral principles and humaniatrian values. . . . It regards all human beings with compassion and warmth. Buddhism does not know the concept of superiority or inferiority. It is linked to the *sangha*. It spreads the message of equality of human beings and independence. That is why a Buddhist can never be a Dalit.

A Buddhist cannot be a Dalit! For the supporters of the TBM/TBMSG, to identify as a Dalit would mean limiting Buddhism to its political aspect. As a result, they blame Dalit activists of engaging in protest and violence. The combination of politics and religion is for them a danger to the progress of the Buddhist movement. Thus it is not surprising that I have not come across any strong supporter of the RPI in the TBM. A Pune University employee, who is also a member of the TBMSG, explains in more polemic terms:

> The leaders of the Dalit movement are selfish and corrupt. They are demagogues and they want to suppress the other streams of Buddhist thought. They waste a lot of time, energy and money. . . . The TBMSG is leading the Buddhist movement in a peaceful manner and continues to promote Doctor Ambedkar's work with respect. The only condition to be part of this organization is the practice of Buddhism. . . . Buddhism teaches love for one's fellow humans, a feature that is not part of the Dalit movement. There is no feeling of brotherhood amongst the Dalit activists.

As a result, the TBM/TBMSG is one of the most important Buddhist organizations in Maharashtra today. Several religious and social activities involve the participation of activists, thus establishing strong bonds between the organization and its most peripheral members. The basis of this dynamic relationship is the belief that each individual should practise Buddhism as part of his daily life. A Buddhist should distinguish himself in his life-style and his thought.

The TBM/TBMSG differs from the BSI in its structure and ideology. Its objectives, the recruitment of members, its functioning, its proselyte propaganda in favour of a spiritual Buddhism, as well as efficient management distinguish the TBM and the TBMSG from their counterpart. As a decentralized Mahar organization, the BSI does not face competition as it does not have any formal recruitment of members. It focuses on commemorating Ambedkar. Even though the BSI also represents a universal and missionary organ-

ization in theory, it has neither a sufficiant number of enthusiastic activists nor an administrative structure nor the means to succeed as a universal missionary organization. The BSI is faced with severe fragmentation and a lack of operational infrastructure. It has the advantage of being founded by Ambedkar, and brings together several Buddhists, though it is incapable of managing them. On the other hand, the TBM/TBMSG is troubled by permanent crises concerning its legitimacy. Its Western management and apparently autocratic structures are seen as a problem. The TBM/TBMSG tries to enhance Ambedkar's image in order to legitimize its 'spiritual' mission and to build a universal enlightened Buddhist community. This avoids public conflict with other Buddhist factions.

Having mentioned the structure and objectives of these organizations, what can one say about their members? In the course of my research I have observed that the TBM/TBMSG and the BSI both recruit almost exclusively urbanized Mahars. In my interviews I always had the impression that the members of the TBMSG were more capable of articulating their Buddhist identity. One factor that could explain this observation is that the TBM/TBMSG have regular training for their members. The meditation classess, lectures and discussions contribute to the formation of a standardized discourse. This does not mean that the members of the BSI are less eloquent, but the BSI provides a more diffuse and less developed discourse than the TBM. What surprised me is the fact that there are no differences among the members based on socio-cultural parameters such as age, education, or profession. Nevertheless, each of these organizations has a specific profile: there are practically no Buddhists who are members of both the organizations.

Polemics against the TBM

The conflict between the Buddhist factions seems to crystallize around the TBM. The BSI and the Dalit activists claim to be the 'legitimate' heirs of Ambedkar and consider the TBM/TBMSG a serious threat. Their criticism has various aspects. The TBM is accused of being exclusively managed by 'Westerners'. The question 'from where does this money come' is often polemically asked. For many Buddhists, it is intolerable to see the British consider themselves as Ambedkar's heirs. 'They are Westerners and

missionaries' is a common statement. A young Dalit activist explains: 'People use Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar's name to gain entry into our community. They pretend to practise meditation and spiritualism behind this mask.' Some people would go to the extent of stating that Sangharakshita would not have liked Ambedkar. *Bhikkhu* Sumedh published a four-page pamphlet in Marathi in 1995, where he claims that Sangharakshita would not have appreciated Ambedkar and that he would have refused to participate in his conversion ceremony. Moreover, he accuses the TBM/TBMSG of being organized according to a Christian model, of being anti-monastic, and of laying too much importance on Sangharakshita. Another Dalit activist adds:

> Ambedkar considered Buddhism as a political weapon to fight against Brahmanism. He did not want people to practice religious rituals. I don't go to the temple. I am a pure Buddhist. . . . The decline began with Sangharakshita. He wanted to make us good Buddhists. But the problem is not of becoming good Buddhists, but of becoming active Buddhists. . . . Spirituality, mental satisfaction, meditation, what do all these terms mean? How does one attain mental peace if there is no peace in society? Self-emancipation is not possible without social emancipation. This is why the TBMSG has its limits. . . . We want people to be active Buddhists, not pacifists or mere spiritualists. We must revolt against the social system and against Brahmanism.

The spiritual and ritual aspect of Buddhism is denied by several Buddhists as they do not see it as a part of Amdedkar's teachings. Spiritualization is seen as a questioning of the political aspect of Buddhism. The TBM, being an anti-political movement, would deviate from Ambedkar's ideas. Raja Dhale explains, 'The TBM members work in order to ensure their own salvation. Our point of view is social and non-spiritual like the one of the TBM. We are different. Freedom in society is not a personal or individual affair.'

Another important example is the debate between the Dhammachari Lokamitra and Gopal Guru, once professor of Political Science at the University of Pune. Gopal Guru (1991a) openly criticizes the TBM/TBMSG of having constantly 'Hinduized' the Dalit masses. He refuses to accept spiritual methods of liberation from poverty and suffering. He doubts that one can find solutions to the Dalit problems through 'transcendental meditation'. The TBM's 'spiritual' methods eliminate the political, progressive and scientific content

of Ambedkar's Buddhism, which is essentially a fight against domination by the superior castes. Guru believes that the Dalits become insensitive to the 'real' problems through meditation. Individual ethics as prescribed by the Five Precepts is secondary to political mobilization (Guru 1991a: 341).

The Dhammachari Lokamitra (1991) responded to Guru by explaining that for Ambedkar, Buddhism cannot be de-linked from the practice of *dhamma*, and that this practice involves a change in spiritual state and behaviour which allows one to control his life and help others. He explained that the spiritual word must be understood in this manner. Buddhist meditation is thus a means of attaining higher spiritual states. It is a practice that is central to Buddhism. Finally, he repeated that the TBM and TBMSG not only teach spiritual Buddhism, but also accomplish social goals (Lokamitra 1991: 1304).

In his turn, Gopal Guru responded by saying that neither meditation, nor spirituality are part of the Buddhism as preached by Ambedkar, and affirmed that the terms 'Dalit' and 'Buddhist' are complementary. Ambedkar's Buddhism is a political and social philosophy:

> Ambedkar's conversion was not a religious conversion, but was a strategy for creating negative consciousness among the 'dalits' against the hegemony of the dominant castes/classes. In fact, Ambedkar has categorically made it clear that Buddhism is one of the essential elements in the process of bringing about political revolution leading to the overthrow of such domination. . . . it is Ambedkar who tried to enthuse it in Buddhist teaching and practice to help the 'dalit' masses understand that the solution to their problems lies in their radical politicization and not in spiritualization. (Guru 1991b: 1699)

This discussion is a typical example of a continuous conflict. The TBM/TBMSG thus contributes to the polarization of the Buddhist community. The debates regarding true Buddhism and Ambedkar's authority tend to be concentrated on notions of spirituality, the individual, meditation, politics, and Dalits. The TBM/TBMSG functions as a catalyst, contributing to the division of the Buddhist movement into a spiritual faction that is opposed to a political faction. Dalit activists deny the liberating values associated with the social endeavours of the TBM/TBMSG. The apolitical nature of this organization would make its work ineffective in the pro-

motion of the structural changes necessary to uplift the oppressed classes. The TBM/TBMSG does not seem to understand the basic question. Is the spiritual Buddhism that it preaches capable of motivating a political uprising in order to liberate the oppressed classes? Or is it a political neutrality, which is a strategy in self-defence against Hindu nationalists who are skeptical about all Western presence on Indian soil? Finally, one cannot but remain confused over the vague spiritual, religious and political concepts.

INSTITUTIONALIZED PLURALISM

On 25 December 1996, the Siddharatha Sahakari Bank was founded in Pune, being the first 'Buddhist' bank in Maharashtra. Moreover, in each Buddhist area, there are *mandalas*, some officially registered. One finds *mitramandalas* almost at every corner, the Bhimsagar Mitramandal, the Bhimsainik Mitramandal, the Panch Sheel Mitramandal, the Rahul Mitramandal, the Trisharan Mitramandal. Equally the RPI and Dalit organizations, which cannot be explicitly termed as 'Buddhist', are nevertheless run by Buddhist Mahars.

The Republican Party of India

At first glance, the RPI is not a Buddhist organization in the true sense of the word. However, it is dominated by Mahars. This is the reason for including this party in our survey. It is necessary to note that Ambedkar did not want this when he announced the creation of a new political party open to all and founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity in 1955. He explicitly stated that it would have nothing in common with the Scheduled Classes Federation. Zelliot (1979a: 279) emphasizes Ambedkar's effort to unify different untouchable communities into a politically powerful group. This aim was never accomplished. The RPI still widely recruits members and supporters and as a result also its electorate from amongst Buddhists of Mahar origin (Omvedt 1994b: 157).

The RPI is severely fragmented today. Since its creation, its leaders are constantly fighting for the leadership of the party (Gokhale 1993: 212-63; Morkhandikar 1990; Suresh 1998: 368). On 6 December 1995 Ramdas Athavale, R.S. Gavai, and Prakash Ambedkar proclaimed their intention of reuniting in order to contest the elections jointly.

The unity was short-lived. During the municipal elections in February 1997, the RPI faired modestly.[18] Some RPI activists refuted the results, claiming that there were irregularities and attempts at poll rigging. Subsequently, the old divisions re-emerged.[19] The same events repeated themselves in 1998. During the presidential elections, the divisions re-surfaced. The presidential candidates Gavai, Ambedkar, Athavale and Dhale called for unity but none of them was able to achieve the goal. As a result, the RPI was represented by two factions on the new electoral rolls.[20]

Nevertheless, the RPI covers the majority of the Buddhist electorate. In the Buddhist settlements of Mumbai and Pune, almost everyone is linked to the RPI in some way or the other. The Buddhists hoist the RPI flag everywhere, open branches without informing the central committee and without paying their dues. This explains why it is impossible to determine the exact number of RPI members (Kolhe and Thombare 1988:150).The identification of the Buddhists with the RPI is so strong that the other parties such as the BSP are not given enough support by the Buddhists. Due to this, Ambedkar has become a fixation. All the symbols of the party concern him. His bust and his pictures are everywhere. He is the imaginary charismatic leader, the founder of the party. The RPI has tried to integrate representatives of other untouchable communities, but these attempts are more a farce to hide the fact that it remains basically a Mahar party.[21] It is evident that a party that is based on a single caste is incapable of becoming a truly powerful political party.

Admittedly electoral behaviour as well as Buddhist political sympathy are very diversified and the RPI does not get all the Buddhist votes. Many Buddhists have lost faith in their leaders whom they regard as corrupt and powerless. They blame their leaders of being incapable of guiding the movement. According to one Buddhist: 'Today's leaders are only involved in organizing protests. Most of them have not even read Ambedkar's works. It is because of them that we have become weak.' Some Buddhists thus vote for the Congress and the Janta Dal, while others identify with the ideology promoted by the Samajik Samarasata Manch (Guru 1991a: 339; Pandit 1994: 64; Shastree 1996: 125-6). Namdeo Dhasal, founder of the Dalit Panthers has in the meanwhile shifted loyalties to the Shiv Sena.[22]

The People's Education Society

The People's Education Society showcases the emancipatory programme of the movement better than any other Ambedkarite association. Founded by Ambedkar in 1945 in Mumbai, this organization is presently associated with many schools, colleges and households in several towns of Maharashtra (Kshirsagar 1994: 98-9). The Siddharth College in Mumbai and the Milind College in Aurangabad are the most famous examples. The organization promotes general education and focuses less on Buddhism *per se*. These colleges impart education to Buddhist students as well to students from other communities, but Buddhism is symbolically present everywhere. Most of the Dalit intellectuals have graduated from these colleges. That is why Jayashree Gokhale (1993: 195) rightly calls these institution Buddhist.

The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation

On 14 October 1971, Kanshi Ram founded the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Minority Communities Employees Association in Pune. On 6 December 1978 this association was transformed into a national federation, the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) in Delhi. With the help of this organization, Kanshi Ram hopes to bring together and unite the scheduled castes and tribes, the other backward classes, and the religious minorities (Suresh 1998: 370). He has arrived at the conclusion that almost 90 per cent of the Indian population is exploited and oppressed.

In contemporary Maharashtra, the BAMCEF represents one of the most important Ambedkarite associations. It is well established and politically visible unlike its political counterpart the BSP. Even though it recruits people from all communities, it mostly recruits Buddhists. The BAMCEF is actively present during celebrations, and it regularly organizes meetings. One of its main activities is the publication of propagandist literature. The *Bahujan Voice*, subtitled 'Champion of Social Revolution', is published by Waman Meshram in Nagpur. In Aurangabad, D.K. Khaparde has edited the *Mulnivasi Times* since 1995. The profile of these magazines is very clear: to make the BAMCEF's voice heard and to make the

'indigenous' people revolt against the 'Aryan' invaders, to fight Brahmanism, and defend the exploited masses. Hindu nationalists from the RSS and the BJP are the targets of much criticism and all arguments revolve around the terror of the upper castes.

Other examples

The Buddhist organizations are based in urban centres where there is a moderately developed infrastructure and an interested audience. Most of them are more or less linked to the Dalit movement. They often meet under a famous leader. This is the case of Samyakkranti (Revolutionist Organization) founded in 1991 by the renowned Raja Dhale. In an interview Raja Dhale had the following to say about his organization:

> The Samyakkranti movement has various goals. We all belong to oppressed classes, we are the downtrodden. We have no rights. We have nothing. This is why we should preach the *dhamma* in order to liberate people form this slavery. In this way we are totally different from any other movement in the country. The goal of Samyakkranti is to uplift the oppressed classes and give them an equal social status. Equality is our goal. We are not so different from the Hindus. All we want is equality, which the Hindus have refused us so far. The Samyakkranti is not an organization reserved for Buddhists. I founded this organization with the aim of achieving social upliftment. This is a mass movement. It is true that we preach Buddhism . . . and that most of our members are Buddhists, but we are primarily people who want to change society. We want to do away with caste barriers. We do believe in Buddhism. After all, it is the only efficient way in destroying the caste system. There are also some brahmans who have converted to Buddhism and who agree with us.

Uplift of the oppressed classes and emancipating them socially are the key words of this discourse. It is very difficult to distinguish between the various organizations, based on their objectives. It is more a question of leadership, that makes the difference. The same applies to the activities as well. The question of Buddhist identity is ambiguous. 'We are Buddhists, but open to others at the same time.' The contradiction between the universalistic pretension and the social reality is recurrent as the organization is dominated by Mahars.

The Nalanda Charitable Trust is based in the civil servant headquarters in Bandra, a residential area in Mumbai. It runs two other

associations: the Yashodhara Mahila Mandal and the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Sanshodhan Samstha. The latter is essentially a library housing thousands of books: Dalit literature, Buddhist literature, and the works of Phule and Ambedkar. This association is very useful as a research centre. It also distributes free educational material among poor children. The Yashodhara Mahila Mandal led by Meenakshi Moon, a repeatedly quoted Buddhist activist, is an association for women. Meenakshi Moon explains:

> I invite women to become members of the *Mahila Mandal*. I always tell them to observe the Twenty-two Vows, to stop believing in Hindu gods and saints, and stop worshipping them at home. Yesterday, in somebody's house, I took a statue of Sai Baba and broke it. I told them: 'Keeping Hindu idols at home is practising Hinduism.' I spread Buddhism through our trimestrial magazine, *Amhi Maitrarani*.

The iconoclastic vein of thought in this discourse is clearly visible. Its exclusivist nature is even more obvious if we know that Sai Baba of Shirdi is, at least in Maharashtra, respected and venerated by all communities and castes. During my surveys in Bombay, besides, I accompanied Moon when she was visiting poor Buddhist localities. She met people and discussed Buddhism with them, as well as the necessity to renounce the *puja* for Hindu gods. If she met people who practised this kind of ritual, she asked them why. If they considered themselves Buddhists, how could they have pictures of Krishna and Sarasvati while having pictures of Ambedkar? Once, she got up and took a poster of some Hindu gods, which was on a wall. She put it in her bag and took it with her. She explained to the family that it was not good to keep such a poster and that she would return with a poster of Ambedkar, which they could put in place of the other poster. That's exactly what happened a few days later.

The Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar School of Thought was created in 1992 in Mumbai to celebrate Doctor Ambedkar's centenary. This 'school' regularly organizes public seminars on Ambedkar's philosophy and on his impact with reference to current problems. Most of the members are professors at Bombay University, in different faculties, calling themselves 'staunch' supporters of Ambedkar. The Bauddha Samskriti Kendra and the Dr Ambedkarism Trust also exist in Mumbai, whereas the Buddhist Forum and Research Institute and the Babasaheb Ambedkar Buddhist Mission are based in Pune.

PERSPECTIVES

The organizations I have described are the nuclei where Buddhist opinions and identities crystallize. They, legitimate, and give uniformity to the new religious tradition in one way or another, more or less successfully. This institutional dimension is a central point in my analysis. It is here that different trends and contradictions exist within the same movement, and clash in the most obvious manner. Different phenomena contradict and complement one another, such as fragmentation and uniformity, competition and separatism. They characterize the current situation of the movement and contradict all attempts towards over-simplification. Let us recapitulate.

National contacts

Different Buddhist associations have irregular, sporadic, and often contradictory relations amongst themselves. At the national level, there is practically no contact. Some activists like R. Bandhu, are trying to change this situation. He founded the Indian Buddhist Co-ordination Committee in Delhi as a forum for Buddhists to interact. *Yuga Udbodhan*, its monthly magazine, published since 1995 in Hindi and English, tries to establish relations amongst the different lay and monastic Buddhist communities in north India.[23]

The famous Maha Bodhi Society of India should in theory unite the diverse followers of Buddhism. In reality, this organization traditionally attracts an intellectual elite belonging to the higher castes of Bengal, even though the Ambedkarite activists have entered it today. One regularly finds articles on Ambedkar in the *JBMS* toady, but on the whole, the reciprocal resentment is still quite strong. Moreover, the MBSI does not undertake particular activities in Maharashtra.

The Vipassana Research Institute, whose centre is located at Igatpuri, near Nashik, represents an association that reunites Ambedkarite Buddhists, Hindus and even Buddhists from the West.[24] But this is not a Buddhist association in the proper sense of the term. According to S.N. Goenka the founder, *vipassana* is an ancient meditation technique, pre-Buddhist, which was probably rediscovered by the Buddha and anyone can practice it. I met some Buddhists of Mahar origin who have participated in these meditation seminars. But most of them expressed strong resentments towards

this institution. Kantowsky (1999: 182-3) quotes Buddhists who detest it because this would be 'a further attempt of the Hindus to appropriate Buddhism' and because there would be only 'Hindus from the upper castes who dislike the neo-Buddhists'. In fact, according to my observations, the people who are attracted by the *vipassana* type of meditation are indeed often wealthy middle class and upper caste Hindus.

Internationalization of the Dalit cause

The trends of marginalization and separatism are in contrast to a recent and striking phenomenon: the internationalization of the Dalit cause. The Ambedkar Center for Justice and Peace[25] at Toronto, and the Dr Ambedkar Memorial Trust[26] at London, are organizations for the most part founded by Indian supporters of Ambedkar who have emigrated and by local activists working for human rights.[27] However, the interest in Ambedkar goes beyond the militant context of Indian immigrants. Over the last few years, the cause of the untouchables, has found an international audience (Poitevin 1987, Kamble and Kamble, 1991; Kondvilker 1985; Pawar 1988). The French journalist Marc Boulet (1994) and the novelist Lyane Guillaume (1996) have chosen untouchability as a literary theme. The German activist Schwägerl (1995), denounces untouchability as a form of racism. German television channels are also catching on.[28]

There are also international Dalit magazines, such as *The Dalit Voice,* published in Bangalore since 1981 by V.T. Rajshekhar, a militant Dalit activist and journalist. This magazine considers itself the voice of the oppressed and persecuted. In the same perspective of solidarity, but in a more sober manner, the *Dalit International Newsletter* informs the international audience about the situation of the Dalits in India. This is the first magazine to be published outside India since 1996, by the American couple, John C.B. Webster and Penny L. Webster at Waterford. Webster, born in New York, is a member of the Presbyterian Church. He studied and taught theology in the USA and in India. He is particularly interested in the Dalit Christians (Webster 1994). In this magazine, renowned authors like Lynch (1998) and Jaffrelot (1999) have published on the present state of the Dalit movement. Mainly circulated in the United States, this journal nevertheless promotes a certain internationalization of the Dalit cause.

One interesting incident took place in 1989. The commission of the antiracist programme of the Ecumenical Council of Churches thought of creating a forum for Dalit solidarity (Scott 1994). In fact, recently, Christian theologians such as James Massey adopted the Dalit concept to appeal to Christians originally from untouchable castes.[29] In December 1992, the Dalit Solidarity Program was founded in Nagpur, exclusively financed by the Ecumenical Council of Churches in order to promote the cause of all the Dalits in India, independent of their religion. The committee was made up of Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, a Muslim and a Sikh (Scott 1993: 16-18; Dalit Solidarity Program 1994). The programme is celebrated as 'the beginning of a national alliance of Dalits' (Schwägerl 1995: 102) or the beginning of 'a new form of co-operation between Christians and Buddhists' and as a result 'a new era of dialogue' (Brück and Lai 1997: 75). In reality it has met very little enthusiasm on the part of the Buddhist Mahars. Most of the Dalit activists who are aware of it criticise it as dominated by Christians. They see it as an improper Christian attempt to adapt to Ambedkar.

International Buddhist networks

The same phenomenon can be observed on the Buddhist side. Since the beginning of the Buddhist movement, some leaders like Raj Bhoj and Shantabai Dani, left for Sri Lanka or Nepal, to participate in international Buddhist conferences. Ambedkar established special relations with Japan, which continue even today. In 1982 the Dalit Panthers, Arun Kamble and Ramdas Athavale, were invited to Japan (Brück and Lai 1997: 75). With the aim of liberating the Bodh Gaya temple, the Japanese *bhikkhu* Surai Sasai settled in Nagpur and mingled with the Ambedkarite Buddhists. The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, a Taiwanese Buddhist association, supports the Maharashtrian Buddhists with free publications.[30] Let us also mention the magazine *Bheem Patrika* edited by L.R. Balley[31] and Bhagwan Das who have been regularly publishing short stories and pictures of the master Hasing Singh Yun, President of the Buddha's Light International Association. The TBM is another good example of the ongoing internationalization of the Buddhist cause. The various subsidiaries, British and Australian, of the FWBO encourage the Buddhists of Maharashtra through several charitable projects. Let us also mention the numer-

ous Western Buddhist writings which are circulating amongst Ambedkarite Buddhists, and which are a witness to a certain exchange of ideas.[32] However, it should be noted that international contacts are only reserved for the urban Buddhist elite and not for the Buddhists in general, of whom the large majority still continue to live in villages and are associated with these organizations in a very peripheral manner.

The *bhikkhus* and the *bhikkhunis*, the Dalit Panthers, the followers of a spiritual Buddhism represented by the TBMSG, and the RPI activists mark the real diversity of the Ambedkarite movement. This diversity is also the cause of conflict because certain associations proclaim their role as the exclusive guide. The members of these organizations belong to the same community and they all consider themselves Buddhist, the rightful heirs of Ambedkar, and often they sympathize with other associations at the same time. However, I insist on the differences within this movement because the scholarly discussion seems to largely ignore this aspect. Baumann (1991) does not take into account the conflicts which envelop this organization when he calls the followers of the TBM the legitimate successors to Ambedkar. Fitzgerald (1994) and Sponberg (1996) mention the conflict, but affirm that the transcendental Buddhism of Sangharakshita and Ambedkar's rationalist Buddhism are not as incompatible as claimed. In fact, we saw how Sangharakshita's and Ambedkar's Buddhism are similar and how they are contradictory at the same time. The aim of this chapter is not to compare these two schools of thought, but to understand how the present Buddhist discourse is institutionalized. With the help of publications and interviews, I have shown how the conflicts and rivalries between these associations function. For this, it is important to highlight that the debates mentioned are based on different interprtations of Buddhism, as a religious tradition of the Mahars as civil morality, as universal spirituality or as political commitment.

NOTES

1. This Pali term can be translated as 'education' or 'teaching'. It is the equivalent of the term 'religion'.
2. This Pali term designates a lay disciple or devotee.
3. This term traditionally designates 'the one who is homeless', i.e. a beggar who has renounced the world. Dharmapala re-introduced this word in modern Buddhism to name the one who is homeless and leads a life of

celibacy without legally being a member of the *sangha* (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 205-17).

4. Cf. *JMBSI*, 1998, 106, 1: 44.
5. 'Inner vision' or 'analytical vision', the term designates a form of Buddhist meditation (cf. Meshram 1994; Sobti 1992).
6. See the critical review of Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (*The Light of Dhamma*, 1959, 6, 1: 68-70) published by the Buddha Sasana Council, a Burmese Buddhist association. The reviewer recognizes that Ambedkar is a great personality, but criticises him for quoting the canonic texts incorrectly extrapolating, and providing a false interpretation of them.
7. 'In India the movement started by Ambedkar was not Buddhism as he maintained, but a campaign for social reform under the name of Buddhism, and he has promulgated the idea that bhikkhus are for the purpose of social service. But his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is misnamed for he preaches non-Dharma as Dharma, even sweeping away the Four Aryan Truths as a later addition by scholar-monks. . . . Hence the so-called New Buddhists or better named Ambedkarists, surround bhikkhus aggressively and tell them what they should do and abuse them if they are not actively engaged in social work of preaching reform' (Jivaka 1959a: 175-6).
8. Interview with W. Rhode, *Sunday*, 7 to 13 May 1995: 55-6.
9. See, for example, *Bhagavan Buddha aur Unka Dharma*, the Hindi translation of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Siddharth Prakashan, 1995 [1961]. This is valuable because the author annotates the entire text, Ambedkar never having mentioned where the quoted passages came from (Moon 1995). Kausalyayan also published *Achuta Kaun Aur Kaise*?, the Hindi version of *The Untouchables*: *Who Were They and Why They became Untouchables*? Samata Prakashan, Nagpur, [1949] 1994.
10. According to Sangharakshita (1987b: 183), the three Buddhist worlds are: the world of desire (*kama-loka*), the world of shapes (*rupa-loka*) and the world without shape (*arupa-loka*).
11. This rule came about after accusations were made (Vishvapani, 'Learning the Harsh Way: What Did Happen at the Croydon Buddhist Centre During the 1980s?', in *Dharma Life*, 1998, 7: 56-61).
12. Cf. *Annual Review 1990* and *Annual Review 1991-92* published by the TBM, Pune.
13. There are two main ordination ceremonies of the TBM; one is private and the other public (Subhuti 1988: 141, 182-3). The first concerns the individual and his spiritual rebirth. The second is an opportunity for the novices to have their decision witnessed by a crowd.
14. This rite is taken from a Buddhist initiation ceremony (*abhisheka*), where the disciple obtains the power to learn certain meditation exercises from his master (Harvey 1990: 260).

15. In Pali, an interjection of a wish, affirmation, or applause.
16. Jeremy Goody, born in 1947, in London was admitted to the FWBO as Dhammachari Lokamitra in 1973. He became an Indian citizen and married a Buddhist Mahar woman. He is one of the key TBM figures in India today, though he has officially retired from the TBM. Today he lives in a Buddhist colony in Pune.
17. Dhammachari Lokamitra, 'Buddhism in Maharashtra with Reference to Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha (Ideology and Programmes)', paper presented during 'National Seminar on Post- Ambedkar Dalit Movement in India' at the University of Pune between 27-9 March 1997.
18. The RPI won 3 seats in Mumbai and 6 in Pune.
19. Cf. 'Raja Dhale elected RPI President', *ToI*, Mumbai, 25 March 1997; 'RPI Challenges Party Polls', *Ind. Exp*., 27 March 1997; 'Gavai elected RPI Chief', *ToI*, Mumbai, 30 March 1997; 'Gavai lays stress on RPI Unity', *ToI*, 9 April 1997; 'Ambedkar Offered RPI Working President's Post', *ToI,* 26 September 1997; 'RPI Leaders for Withdrawal of Gavai's Report to EC', *Ind. Exp*., 29 September 1998; 'RPI (Ambedkar) sets Terms for Talks', *ToI,* 30 September 1997.
20. 'Split in the RPI Conformed', *Dalit International Newsletter*, 1999, 4, 2: 12.
21. When I visited the office of the Athavale faction of the RPI in Mumbai, in summer 1995, I was surprised to be welcomed by a Sikh and a Muslim, apparently members. However, till that time, the heads of the RPI in Maharashtra are exclusively Mahars.
22. Cf. 'Dalit Leadership Split Over Electoral Alignment', *Dalit International Newsletter*, 1999, 4, 3: 3.
23. See for example, the information on the situation of Chakma Buddhist refugees: *Report on Chakma Buddhists, Refugees in India and their Repatriation*, edited by the Indian Buddhist Co-ordination Committee, New Delhi, 1992.
24. From 1969, Goenka taught *vipassana* not only in India, but all over the world. Today the Vipassana Research Institute has meditation centres in many countries.
25. Cf. www.dallits.org, www. dalitusa.org, www.idsn.org, www.web.net/~acjp/mission.html
26. Refer for example the recent publications edited by the organization: *Economic Reforms and Dalit in India*, New Era Publications, London, 1997, and *Padmashree Daya Pawar: A Commemorative Tribute*, New Era Publications, London, 1997.
27. The book edited by Barbara Joshi (1986) based on the Dalit movement, is published by The Minority Rights Group Ltd., an international organization based in London.
28. See for example, the German documentary *Zwischen Gandhi und Ambedkar: Die indischen Dalit und der Unabhängigkeitskampf*, directed

by U. Schauen and broadcasted on 12 and 19 May 1998 by the West-Deutscher Rundfunk.

29. For Massey (1994a), a Protestant theologian from Punjab, the term *dalita* is close to the Hebrew root *dll*, which signifies, amongst other things, 'to be low'. However this word should be compared to the Greek and Latin *dolare* and represents an Indo-European verbal root **del* 'to melt, to divide, to separate, to sculpt, to cut'. The lineage established by Massey is fanciful and attempts to prove link between Babylonians (Biblical) and Indians (Cf. G. Lisowsky and L. Rost, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament*, Würtembergische Bibelanstalt, Stuttgart, 1985: 362; Alfred Thumb and Richard Hauschild, *Handbuch des Sanskrit mit Texten und Glossar*, Carl Winter Univeritätsverlag, Heidelberg, [1905] 1985, pp. 237–8).
30. The book *Bhagavan Buddha ani Tyanca Dhamma*, which is the Marathi translation of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* appeared for the first time in 1970. In 1997, a reprint of 40,000 copies was published by The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation in Taipei for free distribution.
31. Balley lives in Jalandhar. He is himself a Buddhist publisher (Paul 1994, Agnat 1996 and 1992, Das 1980).
32. See, for example, *Mulana Buddhadhamma Kasa Shikavava* (How to teach Buddhism to Children?), a leaflet translated in Marathi by M.S. Athavale, Bauddha Samskriti Kendra Prakashan Pune (Bauddha Grantha Mala, 9). The original text is by Helmut Klar, who, born in 1914 in Silesia, belonged to the Buddhist group of Berlin-Frohnau. The leaflet was published in a British Buddhist journal (*The Middle Way*, 29, 3, 1954: 144-50). It is not very clear how and why the text was translated in Marathi. For more detailed information on Helmut Klar, see Martin Baumann, *Helmut Klar, Zeitzeuge zur Geschichte des Buddhismus in Deutschland*, Universität Konstanz, 1995, Forschungsbereich 'Buddhistischer Modernismus' (Forschungsbericht, 11).

Conclusion

Untouchability has been defined as a manifestation of social exclusion legitimated by a religious ideology. I have shown how, some marginalized castes fought against this oppression by converting to another religion. I described how the 'Mahar' movement developed itself with the help of Ambedkar, his political involvement, as well as his conversion to Buddhism. According to Ambedkar, socio-political emancipation and religious liberation were necessary, as the two were inseparable. A political leader with a charismatic personality, he was greatly admired by his supporters. With his revolutionary background in mind, I placed the Buddhist movement in the social and cultural scenario in the Maharashtra of today. I re-established the local configuration of castes and the conflicts arising from them and studied the Buddhist discourse with its political, literary, ritual as well as institutional ramifications. Buddhism expresses the collective need for differentiation as well as recognition.

CONFORMITY AND CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE BUDDHIST DISCOURSE

The Buddhist discourse is not homogeneous, and Buddhists have varied and sometimes contradictory interpretations of Buddhism. People responded to the question of conversion in a very different manner. The women in villages sang songs on the Buddha and sent their children to school. Some intellectuals contributed to the rise of Dalit literature. The activists motivated the masses and founded associations. They gave up old rituals and started practising new rituals that had a specific Buddhist significance, in a belief that today one is born, one gets married and dies according to the Buddhist rites of passage. The Dalit Panthers and those who are followers of

the 'spiritual' Buddhism, represented by the TBMSG, are an example of the true diversity in the discourse and the practices within this movement.

In the course of this study, I interpreted various texts and speeches, in order to understand the significance that today's Buddhists attach to their conversion and to the notion of *bauddha dhamma*. The practical aspects of Buddhist life have been included: rituals, public ceremonies, political inclination, membership of one of the Buddhist associations, participation in diverse yet collective activities, and political manifestations. Nevertheless, the main focus should be the discourse of this movement, its content, its conformity and contradictions, and its institutionalization.

According to this discourse, Buddhism is not a religion but a *jivanamarge*, a way of life. This is not a tautology but an indication of what Buddhism is thought to be, a particular practice that is distinguished from the Hindu way of life. Even though externally the practice of rituals and the Buddhist way of life seem to differ very little from those of their Hindu counterparts, the discourses are incontestably dissimilar. All the Buddhists that I interviewed confirmed that their way of life is not solely based on ethical rules prescribed by the Five Precepts but also on the egalitarian and atheistic Buddhist principles.

The entire discourse reflects on reality and is at the same time determined by the latter. Without delving deeply into the details of the issue,[1] I have shown how discourse and practice form a dialectic unity. What appeared sometimes were the contradictions between what Buddhists said and did. The most significant example is the case of inter-caste marriages; although it is considered to be a positive model that should be followed by Buddhists, nevertheless marriages are arranged within the Mahar community. A strong anti-ritualism exists alongside the practice of various rituals. The issue of anti-Hinduism is constantly raised owing to the worship of local divinities. This leads to the conclusion that the discourse should not be considered the ultimate reality and that reality should not be reduced to what the most eloquent of Buddhists narrate. The discourse that has been studied expresses an ideal truth, which means that it often corresponds more to wishes or imagination than to social reality.

It now remains to examine the existence of coherent concepts in relation to the diversity of opinions. True, this discourse is not

practised by all Buddhists bearing in mind all its ramifications but a majority of the Buddhists who were interviewed shared similar views. This is evident as far as standardized notions are concerned; a person is a Buddhist because he or she surrenders himself/herself to the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*, and because he or she practises the Buddhist rites of passage. For more elaborate answers, one has to analyse the discourses of the 'elite', well articulated and institutionalized by associations like the BSI and the TBM. It is here that the political *versus* spiritual division of the Buddhists clearly manifests itself.

To sum up, this discourse essentially revolves around Ambedkar and the liberation from untouchability. It is only because of him that today Mahars have become Buddhists. The Buddha, as well as the notions of equality (*samata*), fraternity (*bandhutva*) and independence (*svatantrta*) are topics of crucial significance. A recurring exclamation found is, 'By converting to Buddhism, we have become human beings!' This statement that I have heard hundreds of times is an assertion and a protest against the discrimination that the Mahars suffered earlier. The people questioned speak using the first person plural (*amhi*, 'we'), and on behalf of the community, thereby claiming absolute authority and validity concerning their objectives.

A mention of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is also in order, in spite of the fact that a lot of Buddhists have never read it. Some even refer to it as being a Buddhist 'Bible', as proposed by Ambedkar. As soon as we start interrogating Buddhists about their opinions on matters such as inter-caste marriages, their political inclination, rituals or their relations with associations, we hear a wide array of responses. Are they a result of the social differences among the Buddhists? Can we conclude that the intellectuals promote rationalist, political, and fairly elaborate ideas, whereas the 'less cultured' Buddhist population does not have very clear notions about Buddhism? Buddhism traces a common reference by way of multiple significations, which means that all Buddhists share the same references, the *dhamma*, the Buddha and Ambedkar, but interpret these in different ways. There does not exist a monolithic or normative Buddhism to which all Buddhists of Maharashtra would adhere. The Buddhist discourse is not a closed entity. Being made up of extremely diverse elements, it integrates the anti-brahmanism of Tamil nationalism, topics of the Sinhalese Neo-Buddhism, ancient Buddhist philosophical notions, and Western

influences. There is thus a general floating of ideas, without leading to an anarchical situation.

I have mentioned the tendency of the Buddhists to canonize certain elements of their discourse. They give unequal importance to different aspects of Buddhism. Some tend to favour the political aspects, whereas for others spirituality and meditation bear greater significance. Diversity in discourse manifests itself during the discussions and debates organized by members of the TBM and the Dalit Panthers. However, a simplification of matters should not even be attempted, as some Buddhists belong to several organizations at the same time, and owing to their multiple affiliations, partake in various activities. A 'rationalist' Buddhist could be a member of the TBMSG and a believer in meditation could consider himself a Dalit. Hence it is evident that Buddhists follow several distinctive practices in everyday life, in different contexts and situations. The same person has consciously various opinions. In that sense, the notion of polyphony[2] does not merely denote differing opinions within the movement or those within the same person, but also those of the researcher who reconstructs this.

There is however something irreversible in all this variation. The Mahars protest against discrimination and claim an equal standing in a society that is highly segmented. Unwilling to consider themselves servile untouchables any longer, they question Hinduism and caste system at various levels.

Social equality

Ambedkar's beliefs were part of a reformatory trend which declared the regime of caste and untouchability as India's major problem. This bent of mind largely characterizes the intellectual milieu of his epoch, which was shared at different levels by Hindu thinkers. Dayananda Saraswati denounced the regime of jati and fought in favour of inter-caste marriages. Other Hindus hesitated to question this set-up and considered the varna as the ideal base of the Indian society. According to them, the 'true', tolerant spirit of the varna as it used to exist in the olden days,[3] had to be reinstalled. Ambedkar and a number of other radical reformers like Phule proposed a solution to this problem that took into account the elimination of the caste system and giving up Hinduism, which legitimizes these practices.

The paradox that has been frequently mentioned throughout this study is that Dr Ambedkar did not succeed in integrating the untouchable castes other than Mahar in Maharashtra. I have cited several examples wherein Buddhist families refused to give up their identity and adhered to the logic of caste when it came to marriage. In fact, the abandonment of caste after having converted to Buddhism remains an ideal, as the practical side proves. An element that helps us understand this problem better is the fact that certain Buddhists do not question the existence of a caste system. In an interview a 30-year-old Buddhist civil servant from Pune, said:

> My father converted to Buddhism to free us from the cruel discrimination prevalent in the Hindu religion. The main advantages of being a Buddhist are the following: we now live with pride (*abhimana*) as according to Buddhism all castes and all religions are equal. There is no place for feelings of superiority in Buddhism. In Buddhism, people belonging to all castes and religions are treated equally.

These words perfectly expose the key issue: in Buddhism all castes are equal. The person interviewed appreciates Buddhism because of its stand on caste, without however considering the fact that it does in fact exist. It is clear that this type of argumentation is debated by the 'pure and staunch' Ambedkarites, who consider themselves to be Buddhists indifferent to the very phenomenon of caste. Waghmare (1995: 199-202) goes to the extent of saying that there are only two possibilities: Buddhists should either preserve the 'Hindu' beliefs and continue to form castes and sub-castes, which would imply being faithful to Hinduism (but under the name of Mahar), or they should liberate themselves and become true Buddhists. According to him, it is the stand they take which will determine the future development of this movement.

Universalism

Ambedkar converted to Buddhism to launch a movement primarily in order to reunite all the 'marginalized' in India, and then all the others, with Buddhism as the path of liberation. He expressed a universal sentiment aimed at wiping out national and cultural differences, using themes such as the unity of mankind and universal brotherhood. Today, this universalistic appeal, formulated by activists like K.N. Kadam, remains an integral element of the

Buddhist discourse. In one of the interviews Kadam declared that Buddhism would lead to universal brotherhood, surpassing all ethnic and separatist identities, by virtue of its humanism. 'We need a global movement to liberate humanity from all kinds of fundamentalism. Every human being should be relieved of barriers of caste, religion, and colour. Each one should be recognized as a human being. Being Buddhist signifies being above and beyond the boundaries of caste, race, religion and nationality. This is what universal brotherhood means.' However, there exists a strong contradiction between this demand for universalism and the marked particularity of this movement. On the one hand, the Ambedkarite Buddhists consider themselves entirely Buddhist in spite of their recent conversion, refusing to accept any sort of pejorative categorization as 'new' Buddhists.[4] On the other hand, when asked if they would renounce the predominant status of Ambedkar and whether they would accept other authorities, the limits of this universalism became visible. Some were willing to do so, others opposed any sort of devaluation of Ambedkar and criticised the members of the TBMSG for giving importance to Sangharakshita. For them, Ambedkar is the only leader, and his *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is the ultimate authority on Buddhism. However this Ambedkar fixation is not considered particularistic, as the universal demand is salvaged by the belief that Ambedkar would be a *universal* Buddhist leader. In an interview Raja Dhale explained: 'Doctor Ambedkar has become the world leader of the Buddhists, in the same way as the millions of Dalit Indian Buddhists have become the brothers of Buddhists all over the world. . . . Doctor Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, not because it is an Indian religion, but because it has the capacity to liberate the entire world from slavery.'

What stand does one take *vis-à-vis* the other Buddhist movements? Does Ambedkar's Buddhism mark the end of the existing traditions or is it just one of the several branches of Buddhism? The followers of the TBM and other Buddhist intellectuals consider Ambedkar's Buddhism at par with all the other Buddhist traditions in Asia. Others refute this idea and accept Ambedkar's beliefs as normative. They think that he had purified Buddhism of everything that seemed 'foreign' to him. He had re-instilled in Buddhism its original message. Quoting Raja Dhale once again: 'Ambedkar discovered the difference in the original message of the Buddha and the ritualism that evolved later. He took away from Buddhism the

concept of blind faith and everything unreasonable. He reintroduced rationalism to Buddhism.' According to Raja Dhale, only Ambedkar can define Buddhism:

> When Doctor Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, he embraced it as it was preached by the Buddha himself and not the way it was passed on through tradition. Ambedkar respected the Buddha and his preaching, but he did not accept the later interpretations. . . . The Buddha was full of revolutionary ideas. Tradition on the other hand was full of ritualism. . . . Nobody before Ambedkar had tried to reform Buddhism. This revolutionist did what no one had thought of.

It is evident that the Buddhists who follow the traditions of the Theravada or the Vajrayana consider such a major fixation on Ambedkar a provocation. It is not surprising that the Dalai Lama has strong feelings towards Buddhists like Raja Dhale. At the same time, extremist ways of thinking are not confined to Dhale. Associations such as the TBM who lead their members to believe that they would represent the 'real' Buddhists as a result of their spirituality, reinforce similar separatist trends. Of course there are some with more moderate views. The trends of certain Ambedkarite Buddhists to link themselves with Asian and Western Buddhists as well to establish contacts with national and international Buddhist institutions have been outlined.

Scientific rationalism

Ambedkar asserted that Buddhism would not be a religion but a secular, social, rationalist, humanist and universal morality. His scientific mind led him to question all religions, but he did not abandon the concept of religion. However, according to me, he took a contradictory stand: although he preached a secularized *dhamma*, he did not question the sacred dimension of Buddhism. According to Ambedkar, the society was in need of moral rules that surpassed personal interests. Only their religious and 'sacred' quality could assure these rules being accepted as obligatory and authoritarian by all. This is why he did not join the atheistic or Marxist movement. He converted, created a religious association, and edited a manual of Buddhist rituals. This brings us back to Ambedkar's beliefs in the *original* teachings of the Buddha difficult to understand from the point of view of his humanistic rationalism. According to Ambedkar (1993b: 91), only Buddhism could 'save the world' and assure the

'progress of mankind'. He declared that all of India as well as the whole world would become Buddhist one day.

This same tension characterizes the Buddhist discourse. Certain Buddhists, especially Dalit activists, harbour a rationalistic point of view and seem to have radicalized Ambedkar's intentions. At the same time they claim that their aims have been scientifically proved. There are claims that only Buddhism allows the elimination of wrong religious beliefs. Daya Pawar, in an interview, states:

> As far as Buddhists are concerned, we take refuge in knowledge: the word *buddha* signifies 'knowledge'. This title belongs to the historic person, Siddhartha Gautama. The words *buddhi* and *buddha* do not have the same meaning, . . . *buddhi* signifies 'intelligence' and *'buddha'*, 'knowledge'. This is why Siddhartha Gautama could say that a lot of *buddhas* exist, because as a matter of fact, there exists a multitude of knowledges. Buddhists do not believe in rebirth but in the concept of the five *skandhas*. It is Buddhism that can eliminate blind faith in the concept of rebirth. Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar did not want to create a religion in the traditional sense of the term. He introduced a new way of life, without god, without *karma* and without soul. What he created was very scientific.

Does Pawar know enough Pali or Sanskrit to prove his hypothesis? But that is not very important. His arguments are not those of a philologist, but of an activist who transformed the first of the Three Buddhist Refuges into a homage to knowledge. The incorrect translation of *buddha* (enlightened) as 'knowledge' is striking.[5] An intellectual and abstract notion takes the place of a mental stage. In an interview, Arjun Dangle stated:

> Buddhism is a way of life and a negation of religion. It is democratic socialism. . . . The Buddha was the first democrat and socialist before Marx. Buddhism is essentially a political philosophy. Remember the Three Refuges: The first says, 'I take refuge in wisdom'. The Buddha himself is a symbol of this intelligence (*buddhi*). The second signifies 'I follow the *dhamma*', which means the Buddhist way of life. Finally the third refuge signifies[6] I take refuge in society', the *sangha* representing this society.

Such interpretations must shock all Buddhists, for whom the Three Refuges are the main reference and symbol of Buddhism. In this way, Pawar and Dangle effectuate the most radical rupture with Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The same radicalism manifests itself in the debate over Buddhist rituals. According to the ultra-rationalism of activists like Raja Dhale, Buddhism is against all kinds of ritual, or any deed committed in blind faith. In the anti-ritualistic

radicalism, they even reject meditation, believing it to be 'futile' and a 'too religious custom'. Another Buddhist activist from Mumbai explains: 'I do not believe in meditation. Meditation means nothing but to close one's eyes for hours on end. Hence, it is a waste of precious time. I believe a lot more in wisdom and knowledge. I prefer reading a book on Buddhism than meditating. The Buddha never believed in it. Meditation was invented after his death.' This reveals a complete ignorance of ancient Pali texts that described meditation as practised by the Buddha, sitting under the *bodhi* tree, practising *vipassana*. In spite of the fact that in the modern era, meditation was granted to the laity by the intermediary of Buddhist reformers, when earlier it used to be practised only by the monks, it is wrong to assert its non-existence. Leaving aside meditation, if we see the rituals observed by the Buddhists, the intellectualistic aspect of this debate is revealed. In the fourth chapter, I have described how Buddhists practised their own rituals and how they had invented their own calendar of public festivals.

The dubiousness of these theories increases, however, when we realize that all these rationalistic claims lead to a logic that is quite fundamentalist. Pawar and Dangle define that Buddhism gives birth to diverse interpretations, and they construct a Buddhism that is exclusive. The debate revolves around the standardization of rituals, like the heuristic example of the TBM where the 'spiritual' Buddhists claim to be religious and nothing more. Placing themselves amongst the 'true' Buddhists, they lay stress on meditation, on the spiritual development of each individual and proclaim a universal hyper-individualist who condemns both ignorant Buddhists and the socio-political fights led by the Dalit Mahars for more social justice.

Individual spirituality

After social equality, universalism and rationalism, it was the issue of spirituality that emerged in interviews. Even if spirituality is of no importance to Ambedkar, it characterizes the contemporary Buddhist discourse, and is a topic of debate for the members of the TBM/TBMSG and the 'rationalist' Ambedkarites. The TBMSG activists, the chief promoters of the idea of spirituality, who teach meditation as an essential Buddhist practice and also to become 'true' Buddhists by the transformation of their ego, distinguish themselves in this way from other Buddhists. The notions of the meaning of

life and moral behaviour take precedence over issues of revolution or political strife. This completely dissociates individual responsibility from the religion of the community. The young Dhammamitra no longer talks of social battles but of his personal development. This is far removed from that of his fellow Buddhists who openly ignore these ideas. For them, Buddhism expresses the cultural identity of their community which cannot be questioned: If the parents are Buddhists, their children are born Buddhist; this heredity is not negotiable. In fact, it would be wrong to conclude that all Mahars became Buddhists in a ritual of conversion. Buddhism is part of a verbose and poorly defined whole of multiple and parallel identities of family, caste, profession, social class, political party and nation. In their group activities and publications the TBMSG activists criticise such Buddhism as ambiguous and 'rudimentary'. They vehemently reject Buddhism as being a collective and communitarian identity of the Mahars. However, the social reality is more ambiguous, as the TBMSG Buddhists are with a few exceptions mostly of Mahar origin.

Political engagement

Along the course of this study, it has become evident that Ambedkar did not confuse religion and politics. On the contrary, he consciously linked them. He promoted the idea that religion determines our individual and social lives. The fact remains that he has conceptualized religion as the basis of society, but the issue lies in finding out whether the identification of religious and political paths characterizes the Buddhist discourse. Here is a passage from an interview with a Buddhist activist from Pune, who analyses this situation precisely: 'Buddhist morality influences all of mankind, all domestic, social and political activities. . . . Hence one must see Buddhism and our social and political lives as one. Politics and Buddhism cannot be separated. Raja Dhale writes: 'Doctor Ambedkar emphasized that the foundation of Indian politics should become solid and stable. It is the reason why Doctor Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, the only religion in the world which is based on freedom, equality and fraternity and which is not opposed to democracy. Buddhism is nothing but democracy.'

These passages contain the notions of *dhamma*, *dharma*, *samaja*, *rajakarana*, *samata*, *bandhutva*, *svatantrya* and *lokashahi* (democracy).

Each has a specific significance, but together they form a coherent ensemble. According to Raja Dhale, their separation is impossible. The political dimension of Buddhism cannot be disputed. However, as has been stated earlier, a certain number of Buddhists regard Buddhism as a personal religion that cannot be linked with politics. Their attitudes are marked by scepticism and disillusionment when they criticize the present political situation and assert that politics and Buddhism are completely different entities and should not even be compared. Let us then reconsider the specific discourse of the TBMSG according to which politics and Buddhism would be separate entities which are mutually exclusive. Even here the moral is defined as the base of the *dhamma*: If politics were to follow the same principle, it would have been more just and more efficient. If politicians were good Buddhists, they would be far better. While 'spiritual' Buddhism is not as apolitical as its adversaries portray it to be, one should bear in mind that political involvement is the result of a spiritual awakening, meditation, and a change in ethics and morals.

The controversy that surrounds the notion of Dalit is the direct outcome of these different political concepts. For the Dalit activists, there is no question of being either Dalit or Buddhist, as the two complement each other. Considering oneself a Dalit implies a particular political identity. Buddhism and the Dalit movement are two sides of the same coin. Jyoti Lanjewar, writer from Nagpur, explained to me that being Buddhist and being Dalit would imply the same thing, with exploitation as the common fate. This indicates a strong identification as a socially exploited class, but I have already argued that for a lot of contemporary Buddhists, the word Dalit definitely bears a pejorative connotation. The Buddhists would form an independent movement and would no longer be Dalits. A TBMSG activist confirms: 'Being Dalit implies an inferiority complex. The word Dalit is an insult. A man who respects himself will never accept being called a Dalit. We are all Buddhists and shall remain so.' The TBMSG is certainly a movement where one is likely to find someone who considers the Dalit movement as being too political, extremely activist, and not Buddhist enough. However it would be wrong to conclude that the TBMSG is the only organization to promote the abolition of the term Dalit. Even certain Dalit writers were opposed to it and have proposed 'Buddhist' in place of 'Dalit'. Raja Dhale told me in an interview:

In a traditional social set up, the word Dalit designates the inferior social status of the untouchables, as given by Manu. We should no longer accept it. This term should not concern us. Why should we call ourselves Dalit? Ambedkar and Phule have lived. Haven't they done anything for society? To say 'I am Dalit' is negative. We have to change this. The Dalits have to rise and fight for themselves. We have to follow our leaders Phule and Ambedkar. We believe that this word used since 1950 by the *Dalit Sahitya* is no longer correct. If some writers still use it, they do not understand anything. There has since been a great deal of social transformation.

According to these interviews the concept of 'Dalits' pertains to the Mahars' past. It has been rendered obsolete by the conversion to Buddhism. It is by this same act that emancipation is achieved. Another example illustrates the validity of this argument. During a ceremony in Pune, commemorating the Buddha's birthday, a pamphlet[6] propagating the idea of the abandonment of the term 'Dalit' and the transformation of Dalit literature into Buddhist literature was being distributed. It ends with a demand by the poet Keshavasuta who implores: 'Throw far away the word "Dalit" with energy and fervour, throw it away forever! I, in this era of democracy, am a soldier and a follower of Buddhism!' This anti-Dalit trend is today more and more a part of the Buddhist discourse and represents sentiments of many people. Hence it would be wrong to consider all Buddhists as Dalits. This is an important point to stress upon, as it contradicts observations made earlier by Zelliot (1992a) and Omvedt (1995) who do not perceive a difference between Buddhists and Dalits. Of course, we can assume that they were right at the time they made their observations and that the anti-Dalit Buddhist discourse is a recent phenomenon. Is it the result of a more advanced segmentation and social differentiation among Buddhists? Could these anti-Dalit sentiments be attributed to the new middle class among Buddhists that emerged in recent years? A clear answer is not possible. But we can conclude that being Buddhist and being Dalit is not the same.

Three types of discourse

In the preceding paragraphs, we saw that the tension between religious change and social emancipation, secularized rationalism and spirituality, universalism and fundamentalism, keeps cropping up and even characterizes the debate between the different trends of the movement. Certain Buddhists worship Ambedkar as a god,

others as a *bodhisattva*. There are still others who strongly criticise the former, saying that Buddhism is opposed to any kind of religious cult. This ensemble of interpretations, identities, behaviours, expressions and actions that accompanies the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism, represents the most striking characteristic of this movement. All through this study, the contradictions, fragmentations, tensions, and conflicts that have arisen during the debates on various issues have been recorded: ritualism *versus* anti-ritualism, political *versus* spiritual. This is a surprise, as the majority of articles published till now have not given this fact its due importance, or have sometimes ignored it completely (Zelliot 1992a; Omvedt 1995; Baumann 1991; Sponberg 1996). My analysis has diagnosed a picture of the society, the way it appears, to me in its fluidity, with its contradictions and its ups and downs. However, this does not signify that society should be anarchical, as there is a claim and recognition of norms. Ambedkar and his followers, by accepting rituals, have understood this.

How to coneptualize this diversity? Fitzgerald (1994) proposes a classification, which he admits is not totally in keeping with the more complex reality. He outlines three different types of Buddhism: the rural which varies only slightly from Hinduism, the intellectual, secularized, rationalist and democratic, and the modernist soteriological, as practised by the TBMSG. One wonders whether this classification is not too vague. Fitzgerald talks about types of Buddhism on the basis of discourses, actions and behaviour, without doing justice to the diversity of the phenomena studied. Without a satisfactory definition of Buddhism, he studies phenomena such as representations, symbols, social structures, and rituals, and conceives them as a single abstract category. The diversity of practices that he discovers leads to the conclusion that there are many forms of Buddhism.

I find Fitzgerald's approach incorrect, not for wanting to create a classification, but for not having distinguished between the different levels of his analysis or the different worlds to which he refers. I have already spoken about polyphony: one person has more than one opinion. As a result of this, different types of Buddhisms cannot be extrapolated. Fitzgerald's generalization regarding rural Buddhism being only a variation of Hinduism does not convince me. The same distinction is made even by certain Buddhists but it remains vague. The existence of goddess worship, the practice of traditional customs and participation in Hindu festivities does not prove that the rural

Mahars are not Buddhists. Of course, the rural Buddhists are poorer and less educated, but does that mean that they consider themselves Hindu? The works and the folk songs of Dalit authors such as Daya Pawar and Baby Kamble, who in fact hail from villages, clearly contradict this hypothesis. Buddhist identity does not depend on where one lives.

What, then, are the differences between urban and rural Buddhists? Economic factors, the level of education and cultural environment distinguish the two. It is also true that certain urban Buddhists consider their Buddhist brothers in the villages to be simple folk, poor and superstitious, who will always practise Hinduism even after having become Buddhists. However it is absolutely necessary to question oneself about the impact of Hinduism on the Mahars, to find out whether Hinduism is really more important in villages than in cities. My data, however, though sparse, contradict this hypothesis. The distinction between life in the city and in the village is not as marked as it appears to be (Reiniche 1997: 146). A large proportion of the Buddhist population in cities, especially in slums is of rural origin. Ravindra Kolhe and Mukund Thombare (1998: 139-40) have shown how Buddhist migrants from villages settled in Ramabai Nagar remain attached to their native village. They keep going back to their villages for marriages or festive occasions. On their part rural Buddhists come to Mumbai to visit their parents and their children go to schools or colleges in the city. As a result, stereotypes about life in cities and villages being completely different seem redundant. In fact, I argue that there is no clear distinction between villages, small towns and metropolitan cities, as there are constant exchanges between them.

The same kind of analysis is required for the other two types of Buddhism outlined by Fitzgerald: intellectual, secularized, rationalist, and democratic Buddhism on the one hand and soteriological modernist Buddhism on the other. To me the difference seems absurd. One must realize that *all* Buddhists use the topics of secularism, universalism, democracy and rationalism. An analysis of documents, propaganda tracts and the interviews shows that these notions are used by the soteriological Buddhists of the TBM as well as by the Dalit activists. Besides, certain Dalit activists practise meditation and spiritual Buddhism. It is hence clear that the different discoursive expressions of the Buddhist movement must not be confused with existing social groups.

Instead of establishing a classification of the different types of

Buddhism and Buddhists in the manner of Fitzgerald, I would instead propose a classification of discourses. First, is the ambiguous discourse that is widespread and often quoted and which is passed down through a sort of osmosis among the former Mahars. It is this discourse that is not questioned, which is transferred from parents to offspring, commemorating the revolt against social injustice and liberation from it by converting to Buddhism. All rural and urban Buddhists, professors at the university, and rickshaw drivers admire Ambedkar. They all consider themselves Buddhist and share this concept of an egalitarian and emancipatory Buddhism. They do not, however, adhere to any particular type of Buddhism and know very little about its original forms. This phenomenon is not restricted to the villagers.

Later, two other types of discourses emerged in this study. One of these is more religious, distinguishing itself by its interpretation of Buddhism, which is more spiritual and more personal. The other is more rationalistic, secularized and political. The characteristics of the two discourses are not just a clear and coherent expression of concepts but also are rooted in institutions such as the TBMSG, the RPI and other Dalit associations. According to me each of these three discourses can be individually termed: Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit. These terms are the poles between which the Buddhist-self representation oscillates. In fact, the multiple constructs of the Buddhist discourse, studied all along this thesis, fluctuate between caste identity, Buddhism, and the Dalit project. The three paths represent a dialectic dynamism between innovation and tradition, protest and adaptation, radicalism and conformism.

However, there are other notions which might get more importance in the future like the notion of the *bahujan* (majority) promoted by Kanshi Ram. My point is not to draw a complete picture of all possible expressions of Buddhist political and religious identities. Essentially these distinctions have a heuristic value. It is hence clear that a spiritual discourse is by nature as 'political' as the Dalit discourse. If we consider the Buddhist community in its entirety, there certainly does not exist any clear distinction between the three discourses. The distinctions and debates were brought into the spotlight by the urban 'elites'. A lot of the Buddhists are unaware of this, whereas certain others, including the Dalit writers, practise all the discourses at the same time. There in fact exists a huge grey zone that covers those numerous opinions and ideas, that are neither purely rationalist, political nor spiritual.

Nevertheless, an analysis of these controversies gives rise to a dialectic dynamism between two complementary aspects: the fragmentation and the unity of the Buddhist movement. This is an example showing that collective identity constructions are always polyphonic. This does not refer to the various trends within the movement, but to the fact that the same person can practice different discourses depending on various situations. Several discourses co-exist simultaneously and answer specific questions and challenges. Some consider the Buddhist identity as a social category, others think of it as a religious community. The Dalits lead a battle on the political front in order to claim equal rights for all socially exploited classes. The 'pure and staunch' Buddhist discourse abolishes discrimination against the untouchables by the invention of a new religion. Such diversity implies multiplicity of action. Certain Buddhists defend themselves against the re-appropriation trends of the nationalist Hindus, while others join the Shiv Sena. Some strongly claim a separatist Dalit nationality while others avoid involving themselves in political associations. Some give up their Mahar identity and others don't. It is for this reason that I chose this title for this work because the terms Mahar, Dalit and Buddhist have their own place in today's movement, each indicating a specific aspect.

Towards a general perspective

This study of the Buddhist discourse has a more general heuristic value. The topics and contradictions outlined earlier may reflect on the controversies that characterize several other socio-religious movements. The first controversial point, which is not typically Buddhist, pertains to the conflict between universalism, equality and caste. There are quite a few other movements that promote anti-caste discourses, like the anti-brahman movement, Sri Narayana Guru and Satnami movements (Babb 1972; Deliège 1995: 225-65), though they do not strictly adhere to this anti-caste notion in daily life. I have mentioned the movement in which the Chuhras of Punjab converted to Sikhism (Grewal 1990; Marenko 1974), and also the one in which the Pallars converted to Islam (Raj 1981; Ali Khan 1981). I have quoted the case of the Jains, who in spite of their egalitarian ideologies form communities comprising castes and sub-castes (Banks 1986; Shyamlal 1992). As for the Christian missionaries, in spite of having decided to fight the caste system in India, they did not even manage to abolish it within the church. The ecclesiastical

divisions are still based on the caste boundaries (Chaput 1999; Webster 1994). Hence these movements of reform and conversion have one thing in common: in spite of the egalitarian and anti-caste ideologies on which they are founded, caste prevails and the issue of endogamy has not been addressed questioned seriously.

This is however not the only common point that links the Ambedkarite Buddhists to other modern religious movements. Another common trait is the desire to give a base and an essence to traditions which have till now been dispersed in time and space. The notion of Hindu *dharma* was invented to unify diverse ideologies and practices (Frykenberg 1997; Halbfass 1990: 334-8). These constructs are coherent, iconoclastic and rationalist. Dayanand Saraswati renounces any kind of blind faith, rationalizing all rituals. A *puja* offered to god is considered a 'symbolic' act meant to enlighten a believer, not idol worship. Universalism is another topic favoured by various religious sects in India. Swami Vivekananda (1995b: 43) asserts the universal character of Hinduism through Vedanta, while Aurobindo (1995: 37), Krishnamurti (1992: 24-6) and Radhakrishnan (1995b: 52) establish the notion of universal brotherhood attained through spirituality.

However, fundamentalist trends seem to contradict this universalism. Dayanand Saraswati named the Veda the 'only' religious authority, whereas Ambedkar believes in the Buddhism preached by the historic Buddha. The antagonism towards Muslims is another good example of this same tendency. Even Ambedkar, who claims to be a universal rationalist, expresses strong anti-Muslim sentiments. In Sri Lanka, the universal Buddhism promoted by Dharmapala led to a violent battle against the Tamil minority. These parallels portray the gravity of the situation, and bring to light the controversy that envelops the theory of the Aryans and the native Indians. Similarly, Buddhist essays that were written to reclaim ancient religious places from the Hindus should be compared with the claims made by the Hindus to 'free' Ayodhya.

These phenomena definitely differ from one another, but they do have some common traits. They convey positions that are both universal and separatist at the same time, positions that overlook the complexities of society, the contradictions, tensions and quests for recognition and autonomy. All these discourses have objectives that are: the willingness to unite mankind, to have the same goals and a united appeal, and most of all to abolish social as well as

religious differences. Hence it appears that these visions of a world where everyone is equal and responsible for all fellow beings, more or less bring about the contradiction between universalistic claims and particular identities. Every socio-religious movement must stand out and be known by others for its specificity so that it is distinguishable. Fundamentals that cannot be questioned are invented and canonized in order to affirm a particular identity.[7]

Another point to be emphasized is that all these debates refer to the notion of religion, either explicitly or implicitly. British administrators, Christian missionaries and orientalists promoted its use throughout India. The word 'dharma' is chosen to translate the English term 'religion', not only in Marathi but also in other modern Indian languages (Deshpande 1994: 255; Dhongde 1997: 603). The concept of religion which has been defined in so many different ways and bears so many different connotations, has become an integral part of any self-representative discourse, Hindu, Buddhist or Sikh. In fact, the Indian Constitution uses an inventory that distinguishes six main religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism (Vijayanunni 1995). True, certain Hindu thinkers categorically renounced the notion of religion: Krishnamurti (1992: 26) stated that everyone must listen to his inner voice and practice meditation in order to be able to see god and this will lead him to believe that religion is something one should be free from. But even in denying its application regarding Hinduism, the extract of reflection has been widely accepted. This is important for those who refuse to apply the notion of religion in Asia (Staal 1985). My argument is that the notion of religion exists in India in terms of an *imagined reality* in various political and judicial contexts and independent of its occidental origin.

The topics treated above trace their origin to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the time of British colonization, which not only brought about an economic revolution but changes in administration and jurisdiction, and new medias of communication. The changes incorporated by the British apened up new arenas for expression, and paved the way for new prospects, which had till then been ignored. Exposed to British colonialists, Christian missionaries, orientalists, and theosophists, the Indian thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, or Radhakrishnan formulated their opinions on issues such as universal rationalism, scientific spirit, universal brotherhood, social equality, and individual freedom. These

notions represent progressive and modern values, and belong to a discoursive field common to a number of political or religious trends. What is indeed remarkable is the fact that these notions continue being cited in a number of recent discourses. They are not void of meaning but in fact, reflect the changes experienced by the Indian society over the past centuries. The notions of democracy, freedom, and independence bring into light the growing polarization between the upper castes and the Dalits, which have led to claims of autonomy by the latter. The insistence on individualism indicates that religious practices have been democratized and that the laity plays a principal role within these communities. I thus conclude that debates regarding the influence of politics on religion, private religion, scientific rationalism, and universal brotherhood have all stemmed from the ongoing secularization of Indian society, in spite of the fact that a number of fundamentalist groups have emerged through all religious frontiers simultaneously.

SOCIO-POLITICAL EMANCIPATION AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Early studies on the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism have interpreted it as a collective effort on the part of motivated and well organized individual Mahars to bring about a social change (Fiske 1969; Miller 1969; Patwardhan 1973; Zelliot 1979a). This conversion is linked to a social movement that finds its origin in colonial India. The Mahars joined the British army, migrated to cities, abandoned their traditional occupations, and formed numerous political associations. The conversion that took place in the year 1956 marks the peak of this quest for emancipation. In fact, my research confirms that the main reasons for conversion to Buddhism were to abolish untouchability.

Such mass conversions cannot simply be a quest for social upliftment, a *status seeking movement* in the manner of Bopegamage (1979). One has to be cautious about such a conclusion, for this movement is more complex than it appears. The diversity of interpretations formulated by Buddhists on the one hand and by researchers on the other brings into light this same complexity. The same questions arise once again: should we consider this a movement that is political (Gokhale 1993), anti-caste (Omvedt 1998), ethnic (Kurane 1999), spiritual (Pilchick 1988), or a modern Buddhist

movement (Bechert 1966-73)? Perhaps all these scholarly approaches are in a way justified, as they characterize specific aspects of this movement. In other words, different interpretations have arisen out of the various inherent trends. The RPI politicians, the Dalit Panthers, the Dalit poets, and the spiritually inclined members of the TBMSG promote complementry concepts of Buddhism: it is a collective religious identity, a political ideology, a social reform programme, a religion for untouchables, an individual spirituality, and, of course, a universal religion.

Sanskritization, paliization, or dalitization?

The notion of the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism as a means of obtaining better social status is based on the sociological model of sanskritization, developed by Srinivas. By being politically organized and by taking the appropriate measures to improve the economic situation while adopting brahman values and customs (a largely vegetarian diet and avoiding acts considered to be impure), lower castes can then achieve a better status within the hierarchy of the caste system (Srinivas 1995a: 6). However, this path to social upliftment does not yield the same results for all, because the untouchables will never be able to surpass the 'pollution line'—they will always be considered untouchables. In spite of this fact, they opt for this path that will offer them a better existence (Srinivas 1962: 59). Deleury (1978: 82), in accordance with this theory, interprets the Mahar movement in terms of brahmanization, which I feel is not appropriate. Certainly, the urban class of Buddhists have adopted a new lifestyle, having abandoned their traditional occupations. They send their children to school, are aware of hygiene, and have given up the meat of the carcass. However these issues are of little importance, with respect to other more impending issues. The rules pertaining to eating habits change from place to place, especially in the bigger cities and metropolis, and have little to do with religious communities and castes. On what basis, then, can we talk about brahmanization? In what way do Buddhists imitate brahmans? The strict vegetarianism of brahmans is rarely practised by Buddhists. What then, does sankritization signify? Sanskritization would be a completely impertinent interpretation, as Buddhists do not believe at all in the Sanskrit culture. Their ideology is in fact anti-Hindu and anti-brahman.

Carroll (1977: 359) was right in wanting to know whether somewhere behind this concept of sanskritization lies hidden a more universal phenomenon that is the process wherein the plebeians compete with elites. One must hence wonder if this emancipation of the Mahar population, mainly urban, does not follow from general socio-economic changes and evolutions such as a democratic constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and quotas, besides conversion in itself.

Following the sociological theory proposed by Srinivas, Zelliot (1992a: 139) proposes the concept of 'paliization' as an alternative model. This concept too speaks about social upliftment, but indicates another reference. This model would be based on the Buddhist culture that is driven by the Pali tradition. The Buddhists indeed recite verses in Pali. But what are the social implications of such a tradition? In the case of sanskritization, brahmans are the reference groups, but we do not know their counterparts in the case of paliization. What type of society does Pali represent? Does it represent one of a monarchy as in Buddhist Thailand?

In fact, neither of these two concepts (sanskritization and paliization) justifies the complexity of the phenomenon studied. First, these theories adhere to a social system which is based on hierarchy, monolithic and sometimes elitist. In the case of sanskritization the Ambedkarite Buddhists are nothing but poor fellows who emulate the upper classes.

In this line of thought the Indian culture functions by a reproduction of standard brahman values. We have seen that there exist various movements of conversion to value systems that are completely different from the brahman model. It is in this sense that Charsley (1998) shows the contrast between sanskritization and a process he rightly calls 'dalitization'. Bhikkhu Sumedh, Daya Pawar, Raja Dhale, Vasant and Meenakshi Moon, Seetabai Thakur, and Baby Kamble would be the leading advocates of a non-Hindu and non-sanskritized society. In other parts of India famous personalities such as V.T. Rajshekar, editor of *The Dalit Voice*, strongly promote this alternative vision of the world.

Dalit revolution or Mahar movement?

I have just asserted that the social upliftment of the Mahars is not oriented towards adapting the brahman and Sanskrit cultures, but

in fact questions the two. Omvedt (1994a: 13) insists that Ambedkar was not only a simple reformer, but also a revolutionist who proposed a real alternative. In fact, he was revolutionary by spirit and a reformer in practice. He did not merely want to obtain more social rights and more economic benefits for the Mahars, but wanted to reform the entire Indian social set up that was based on the concept of caste. He criticized Hinduism in its totality for being a system that openly justified inequality and exploitation of the 'lower' castes. He constantly reminded people of the fact that Indian history has always witnessed a battle between classes like the kshatriyas against the brahmans, the Buddhists against the Hindus (Ambedkar 1987b).

While the Dalit activist too speaks of a battle between classes, this does not represent the entire movement. I have shown that the Dalit movement is marked by an infinite segmentation and by political isolation, and does not easily integrate other castes or communities. Moreover, the Dalit movement in Maharashtra pertains exclusively to the Mahar community. Can we then reduce class to caste? In other words, can we describe the Buddhist movement as 'ethnic', as Anjali Kurane (1999) has done?

According to me the word ethnic does not have an apt connotation in this context and the analysis of caste in terms of ethnicity does pose problems. Certainly the social and religious barriers are almost the same. Almost all Mahars are Buddhists and *vice versa*, but ethnicity represents an exclusive identity (Martiniello 1995: 98), something that Ambedkar's ideas opposed. Never does the Buddhist movement 'officially' exclude members of other castes, in fact it invites them to join in. In everyday life however, these welcoming sentiments are less visible, and feelings of resentment against other groups seem to manifest themselves more obviously. However, this problem cannot be attributed only to the Buddhists of Mahar origin. The other castes resent the Buddhist so much that they refuse to join them in their fight against social discrimination. In fact, the discourse of the Buddhist movement is neither separatist nor ethnic. If sometimes the Buddhists express their ascentment against 'Aryan brahmanism' by calling themselves 'indigenous people' of India, they do so on behalf of all lower castes and tribes. They are indeed inspired by notions of race and people. But it is more of a cultural distinction than a racist one, that in any case stems from extremist and activist attitudes, which do not represent the bent of mind of the entire Buddhist community. It would hence be an exaggeration to say that the Mahar Buddhists exclude other castes.

We cannot conclude that the Ambedkarite movement has failed, as this too would be an exaggeration and would pose a number of problems. Public declarations, and inter-caste marriages cannot abolish a social structure that has existed for centuries. It is naïve to believe that the Buddhists can reform Indian society without help from others. Even if they do not accept the ides of a hierarchy, others do. The 'caste system' continues to exist as the principal element in the political and social life in India. There is no indication to show that caste will be abolished in the years to come (Kothari 1991, Reiniche and Stern 1995, Srinivas 1996, Fuller 1997). Besides, this phenomenon concerns not only the (Mahar) Buddhists but also the Sikhs, Jains, Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Another fact has to be made clear. Even if Buddhists form a distinct group, it would be too much, if not incorrect, to conclude that they accept the 'caste system' and consider all other castes inferior. Juergensmeyer (1980: 23-5) has shown that, to respect social conventions does not necessarily signify to voluntarily accept them, i.e. a consensus. In their discourse Buddhists make a constant reference to the term *bauddha* while rejecting their old caste name. To be more precise, the fact that they have not given up their identity as a community does not necessarily signify that they have accepted the values of hierarchy, of purity and impurity, or any other traits of the social system specified by the defenders of the caste system. The older Mahars now perceive themselves differently. They no longer bear the image of being meek devotees. Dalit activists are leading a strong political movement. On 10 and 11 October 1998, the first World Dalit Convention took place at Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. The convention was attended by more than a thousand delegates from across the world. It began with a speech by Ram Vilas Paswan, with Kanshi Ram rendering homage to Ambedkar and Periyar. K.R. Narayanan was awarded a prize.[8] The international lobbying has been successful. In a resolution adopted at its 52nd session, the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights explicitly declared that caste dis-crimination is prohibited by international human rights law. It has repeatedly affirmed that caste, as a form of descent-based discrimination, falls within the defination of racial discrimination under Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Nevertheless, the Dalit movement has to face a number of problems that cannot be neglected, and one must observe how the

situation will evolve. There is no full-fledged Dalit movement spread over India and the various Dalit associations exist only at the local level. Given the heterogeneous and fragmentary nature of this movement, Omvedt's (1994: 341) vision of a Dalit revolution as an alternative for modern-day India seems far-fetched.

In order to be able to better understand this contradictory situation, one must distinguish between Buddhism as the collective identity of the Mahars and Buddhism in its attempt to reform the society as a whole. Indeed these two are interdependent, but they indicate the interaction between Buddhists and the society in which they live. It is evident that Buddhism is a means by which the Mahars can define and distinguish themselves from other castes. In their discourse and various representations they claim a new and distinct existence while explaining why they follow Ambedkar and not Gandhi, and why they respect the Buddha more than Cokamela. However, in daily life the differentiation between Buddhism and Hinduism is less obvious. For example, the break off from customs considered 'Hindu' is not as complete as is made out. At the same time, Buddhism is much more than a collective and specific identity. It is a project of reform surpassing the Mahar community and aims at reforming Indian society as a whole. The discourse relating to social equality, liberty, rationalism, atheism, emancipation of women, and social progress portrays a willingness towards social and religious reforms. Buddhism serves to construct an alternative vision of Indian society and to identify its social adversary, Hindu brahmanism.

Conversion movement

In the opinion of Frei (1991: 215-17) religious motivation and spiritual aspects play a secondary role in collective conversions. Religious conversion is a means to social status, and liberates the former untouchables from despair and humiliation. But this is a short and abrupt interpretation. Indeed, in the beginning the 'religious' character of this movement seems to fade before its important socio-political implications. But I have demonstrated in this study that the conversion of the former Mahars which has been conceptualized in terms of *parivartana* (change, makeover), *dhammacakrapravartana* (setting in motion the wheel of *dhamma*), etc., has undeniable

religious value. In his earlier speeches on the subject, Ambedkar spoke more about apostasy than about conversion (Ambedkar 1993a, 1993b). His objective was to shun everything that could be considered Hindu. The abandoning of feelings of inferiority and the development of self-respect can be analysed as soteriological aspects of this movement. In other words, there exists a very thin line between religious and non-religious notions. Moreover, the social emancipation manifests itself in religious forms. The rituals, images, myths, chants and poems through which the Buddhists describe their mental liberation signify a spiritual change. This is why the Buddhist movement has also to be analysed in terms of religious conversion.

Existing definitions of conversion evoke both sacredness and man's belief in divinity (Severus 1987: 49). The notions of 'faith', 'belief' and 'radical change' were established as its typical characteristics by the phenomenology of religion. The notions of god and religion were presupposed as universal ontological entities whose existence could not be questioned. Ideally, an individual who converts passes from one religion to another, or from a state of ignorance to spiritual awakening. However, most researchers have abandoned this explanation that is characterized by a strong Christian influence and a devaluation of social change. For the last few years an infinite number of studies have been carried out on the social, political and psychological aspects of this phenomenon (Frykenberg 1980; Oddie 1977; Rambo 1987; Knoblauch, Krech and Wohlrab-Sahr 1998). Conversion is seen now as a new commitment involving a change in the psychological, socio-economic and religious domains and of social relations. This phenomenon is independent of geographical locations and historical periods. Bischofberger (1995: 171) looks at conversion as a reorientation in which a person looks back on his past life and rebuilds a future in a different social context having distanced himself from his past. Conversion is viewed by the 'converted' as a change in social status, ideology, worship, outlook, and religious identity.

When we reflect upon the adherence of the Mahars to Buddhism, it brings into light the uniqueness of their conversion. However what seems crucial is that these Mahars did not rejoin a pre-existing Buddhist community. In other words, there were neither missionaries, who converted, nor communities that welcomed them, nor financial or institutional support of any kind. The Mahars

themselves chose, invented and created their new 'religion' autonomously. This conversion represents a sort of self emancipation.

The final point is that the movement of conversion has not ended. It still continues. The most recent and striking example is the conversion of Phoolan Devi. On 15 February 1995, the 'Bandit Queen' and her husband Ummed Singh took refuge in the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the sangha at Nagpur.[9] The ceremony was organized by Bhante Dhammaviryo, a member of the National Commission of the Minorities. This was the first spectacular conversion that took place on the sacred soil, *Dikshabhumi*, since Ambedkar's conversion. After having being initiated by the monks, the couple explained that they would fight exploitation and would follow the example of the Buddha and Ambedkar. Their chief objectives would be the elimination of untouchability and the liberation of Indian women.

All in all, historical and sociological analyses mainly explain the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism in terms of social upliftment and not merely in terms of new symbolic representations, ritual practices and artistic expression. Religious explanations have a tendency to overlook the political and social implications. According to me the exclusive characterization of this movement is too schematic as well as one-tracked. Hence one should opt for a larger category such as that of a social movement that would enable us to analyse a social conflict and a cultural project, a political struggle and a religious re-orientation, and various collective discourses and actions, simultaneously. In this regard, what Martin Fuchs (1999) proposes is particularly interesting, for he defines social movements as a struggle for recognition and representation (*Kampf um Differenz*). This theory is pertinent as it is not limited to the specificity of the Indian context, which the debate on multi-culturalism and the problems of minorities and their recognition in Western societies prove (Taylor 1992). This theory is especially appropriate as it helps explain the Buddhist movement in terms of social differentiation, negotiation, and interaction. The old Mahars ask for representation as far as equal public rights are concerned but at the same time ask to be recognized on the basis of their particular identity and autonomy. However, their recognition remains a controversy and is contested. For example, Hindu nationalists deny the existence of a separate Buddhist religion and 'recover' Ambedkar by their ideology of social homogeneity.

BUDDHISM: A BRIEF RE-EVALUATION OF A CONTROVERSIAL CATEGORY

At the end of this study, one can rightfully question Buddhism as a meaningful category. Buddhism designates formally, the teachings of the Buddha and is considered to be a philosophical and spiritual phenomenon (Eliade 1987; Harvey 1990; Kalupahana 1994; Kausalyayan 1992; Rahula 1978; Schuhmann 1995; Yoshinori 1995). The history of the Buddhist philosophy is marked by significant inconsistencies, and the question arises what is the basis of these teachings? Mehlig (1987: 65-6) thinks that there does exist a basic metaphysical Buddhist principle, recognized by all the schools, Theravada as well as Mahayana: the world is a combination of factors existing together in a functionally dependent relationship. As the world signifies suffering, salvation is a pause in the continuation of functioning of these factors. But it is difficult to accept the idea that Buddhists from all regions of the world, follow this as the principal idea behind their religious identity.

Fukui and Fussmann (1991: 7) propose a more believable definition: that all Buddhists share the same *reference* to the Buddha; they render homage to monuments and idols like the stupa and the Three Refuges. They frequent the same places of worship, read the same books in different languages and maintain the existence of a monastic community which follows the same rules (*vinayas*).

Thus the Mahars should be considered Buddhists with full rights: they worship the Buddha, quote the Three Refuges, resurrect the stupa, edit and read ancient texts in Pali, consider Bodh Gaya a holy place, and maintain the *bhikkhusangha*. In all this conformity with this imaginary Buddhism, the Ambedkarite movement remains undeniably unique. In Ambedkar's case, his Buddhism cannot be easily classified. His secularized and rationalist opinions, his ideas for a civil religion cannot be termed as being 'orthodox'. As this problem has already been discussed there is no place for this issue to be raised once again. When we take the case of the Buddhists of today, the situation poses similar problems.

First and foremost, the *bhikkhusangha* plays a very minor role in the Ambedkarite movement. Another distinguishing factor is the predominant role played by Ambedkar as a political and religious guide. Considered more important than the Buddha himself, he represents in a certain way authority and the basic foundation of

this tradition. He is idolized as a saviour; his name appears in poems and hymns, he is the object of faith and worship. The older generation of untouchables very proudly consider themselves his followers. It is however certain that they have followed his preaching only partially. His views on radical rationalism and his complete rejection of Hinduism and of the caste system are shared only by a limited number of intellectuals and staunch activists. Certain Buddhists refuse to practise rituals, which they consider superstitious, whereas others practise a Buddhism that involves devotion, religion and rituals and that integrates certain elements from Hinduism.

However, we should not evaluate Mahars as either good or bad disciples of Ambedkar. Neither should we judge Ambedkar's beliefs nor the representations of the Buddha and the *dhamma* by today's Buddhists as either authentic or baseless. In this perspective and in spite of their originality Ambedkar and his followers are undeniably Buddhists, but not more or less so than the others.

As far as the term *bauddha dhamma* is concerned, it signifies a polyphonic whole of references to personalities like Ambedkar and the Buddha, to the sangha, to concepts such as humanity (*manuski*), to ritual canons like the Three Refuges, the Five Precepts and the Eightfold Noble Path, to symbols such as the wheel of *dhamma* and the *bodhi* tree. This multi-notional character of the Buddhist discourse does not deny the existence of norms but indicates that norms are subject to constant change and questioning.

Bechert places Ambedkar in the same league as Dharmapala in his conception of a 'modern' Buddhism (1966-73; 37-42). King and Queen (1996) classify the Ambedkarite movement in terms of 'Engaged Buddhism', referring to Asian Buddhist Liberation movements led by the Dalai Lama and the famous Thai reformer Buddhadasa Bhikkhu as well as the secular movement led by Soka Gakkai in Japan. Initially these comparisons appear justified, as they group together all modern Buddhists who are socially and politically committed. But some inconsistencies crop up. On what basis can Ambedkar be compared to Dharmapala and what are the common traits between Mahar Buddhists and Sinhalese Buddhists? According to me, not many apart from some rare Pali texts recited at the time of rituals and an imaginary presence of the Buddha. The uniqueness of Ambedkar's views on the issue of a civil society and a completely secularized Buddhism has been widely reflected upon. The Buddhism preached by the Dalai Lama and by Ambedkar as

well as their political goals vary immensely. Thus their common Buddhist identity is purely referential.

These comparisons follow a phenomenal logic. They all suggest the existence of a Buddhism that would more or less be followed by all believers which is a 'system' of values, rules and practices. Then even if they are Sinhalese, Chinese or Indian, activists, monks, laymen or reformers, every Buddhist has to adhere to the same system (Vogd 1999). Of course we realize that there are specific configurations covering various local and historical contexts. But what about the exceptions and the heterodoxies? How does one judge all those Buddhists who stray from this well-defined system? Are they 'faux' Buddhists? Or it is necessary to invent some more categories as the classifications carried out, as modern, engaged, Asian and Western Buddhists are no longer sufficient? The ideal Buddhist belongs to the world of abstraction. In India as well as in the West, Buddhists adhere only partially to this ideal Buddhism. They follow always various beliefs and practices simultaneously. They lead 'normal' lives (profession, private lives, leisure, political involvement, etc).

It has not been my intention to rebuild a type of Mahar Buddhism, that would be a coherent and rational system with rituals, notions, norms, values and behaviour. I opted for a different and a less pretentious approach, a study of discourses dispersed in time and space, referring to the Buddha and to Ambedkar and which is generally accepted by the Mahar Buddhists. All the while being aware of the abstract nature of such an attempt, I studied the different semantic and practical ramifications of the notion of *bauddha dhamma.* What I did discover is that this notion cannot be defined in one particular manner. As an abstract notion *bauddha dhamma* brings together a number of different meanings: teachings of the Buddha, specific ethics, a secularized moral order, private religion, social equality, universal fraternity, and democracy. The semantics and the nuances keep changing, depending on the context of time and immediate cultural surroundings, the discursive situations, and on the people and authors in question.

Things are even more complicated when we quit the semantic context of the Ambedkarite movement. In legal terms, the Indian Constitution considers Buddhism as a religion *equal* to any other in India. Nationalist Hindus on the other hand think of it as just another branch of *sanatana dharma* of eternal Hinduism. We could certainly claim that the opinions of non-Buddhists do not count in order to

define Buddhism. What counts is what the Buddhists say and feel. However this is not really a solution as the same question of normative classification arises.

I have tried to show that the Buddhist discourse is the result of dialogues and interactions with other socio-religious groups. We fail to understand the ardour with which the Buddhists claim to be different from the others without seeing how the nationalist Hindus try to re-appropriate Buddhism for their own sake. This multi-faceted character of the notion of Buddhism can seem obvious or worse, banal. Nevertheless, it has a heuristic value: the self-assertions of the concerned social group under study, Hindu or Buddhist, can be taken seriously. In fact, it is not, up to me to tell the Ambedkarite Buddhists if they are true Buddhists or not or to add a prefix of 'neo' or 'new' to their identity in order to mark a difference between them and other Buddhists. Besides, when a Hindu claims that he considers himself equally Buddhist, I cannot say that he does not have the right to do so. In the end one could therefore conclude that the notion of *bauddha dhamma* (Buddhism) cannot be defined in one particular manner. A Buddhist is a person who thinks to be a Buddhist in *referring* to the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the sangha.

As a rather fluid concept Buddhism brings together a number of different meanings; semantics and nuances keep changing depending on the context of time and immediate cultural surrounding, discursive situations. The central question which needs to be answered is therefore whether there is something like a central point—be it a doctrine, a ritual or a symbol—which is common to all Buddhisms/Buddhists. Wittgenstein's term of 'family likeness'/ 'family resemblance' seems to answer this question: It implies that different (Buddhist) traditions/communities share no common characteristics which are universally applicable to all (other) Buddhists.[10] There are sometimes common traits but often there are no common things at all.

A last word

The Buddhist movement is always in the process of development. New situations are created, new strategies are developed, new discourses are invented and proposed. Instead of rendering definitive judgements, some final questions should be posed. Will the Buddhist community grow outside Maharashtra? Some reports do suggest so.

On 4 November 2001, more than 5000 Dalits converted in Delhi under the leadership of Ram Raj. It remains to be seen whether tensions between the various Buddhist groups of the movement disappear or increase. Would differences in the movement based on political and spiritual criteria expedite its disintegration? Will the influx of new Buddhist writers, literary expressions, and new rituals continue or has their innovative and creative spirit dis-appeared? One must also observe how relations with other socio-political groups, associates and adversaries develop. Whether the Buddhists are going to alienate themselves further or are going to join other movements? The great resentment and mistrust that Buddhists feel towards Christian Dalits had been briefly discussed. It would be essential to note in future how the Buddhists cope with the Hindu nationalist movement. Before I conclude, I quote Ambedkar one last time: he asked himself the same question about the future of the movement after his conversion in Nagpur. Seeing his end approaching he asked his followers to take the responsibility of driving the caravan. He asked them to continue without him, to advance even in times of adversity and to stop for a moment if required. However, he said that under no circumstance should the caravan go backwards.[11]

NOTES

1. This would need a systematic discussion of the various theories about the relationship between language and action. But this cannot be accomplished here (Bourdieau 1994; Fuchs 1999; Touraine 1997).
2. M. Funch 1999: 369-71.
3. Cf. for example, Aurobindo (1995: 347); Sivananda (1988: 52); Vivekananda (1995a: 80-98); refer to the controversy between Ambedkar and Gandhi published in *Annihilation of Caste* (*BAWS*, vol. 1: 81-96).
4. In Pune, a Buddhist explained to me that a Christian convert would never call himself 'neo-Christian'. Zelliot (1992a: 249) and Isaacs (1965: 173) confirm that the Buddhists reject this prefix. Deliège (1995: 30) is mistaken when he says that the Mahars ask to be called 'neo-Buddhists'.
5. Pawar implicitly cites Ambedkar, who announced on 13 October 1956, on the eve of his conversion, 'I am surrendering myself to the person possessed of knowledge (*buddham*)' (Kuber 1973: 95).
6. A pamphlet obtained in Pune on 28 May 1995 and signed by R.B. Bhosle and Y.G. Salve, bearing the title *Buddhist Mission*.

7. See the Hindu 'catechisms' specially composed for an English-speaking readership: R.K. Sanyal, *The Hindu in Search of God*, Wiley Eastern Limited, New Delhi, 1994; H. Viswanathan (ed.), *Am I a Hindu*? *The Hinduism Primer*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 1996 [1992]; V. Krisnamurthy, *Hinduism for the Next Generation*, Wiley Eastern Limited, New Delhi, 1992; Swami Tejomayananda, *Hindu Culture: An Introduction*, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Bombay, 1995 [1994].
8. *Dalit International Newsletter*, 4, 2, 1999: 9.
9. This event made headlines in the Indian newspapers: 'Buddhists Fight as Phoolan Flirts', *Ind. Exp.*, 15 February 1995.
10. 'Ich kann diese Ähnlichkeiten nicht besser charakterisieren als durch das Wort "Familienähnlichkeiten"; denn so übergreifen und kreuzen sich die verschiedenen Ähnlichkeiten, die zwischen den Gliedern einer Familie bestehen: Wuchs, Gesichtszüge, Augenfarbe, Gang, Temperament, etc. etc. -Und ich werde sagen: die "Spiele" bilden eine Familie. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, I, 67, 3rd edn., Frankfurt a.M., 1983, p. 57.
11. Cf. Kadam 1997: 106.

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